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ABSTRACT

This study of works of Jesse Stuart treats in some depth the setting and background for the humor in his writings, his reverence for the eastern Kentucky hill country, and the various ways he uses materials from his own life and observations as subject matter for his fictional world. After establishing Stuart's kinship with earlier frontier humorists, the book examines Stuart's use of (1) dialect and the natural metaphors of folk speech, (2) eccentric characters and the importance of superstition in their lives, (3) feuds and their causes, conventions, and settlements, (4) folk mythology and the telling of tall tales, (5) the balanced relationship between hill men and the land, (6) the rituals of coming of age in the hills, (7) the political and religious behavior of the hill people, (8) attitudes toward death and views of afterlife in the hills, and (9) Appalachia as a microcosm of humanity. Stuart's novel, "Foretaste of Glory," is then analyzed as an example of his humor and satire. (JM)

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BELLARMINE - URSULINE COLLEGE

"THE TRUTH IS FUNNY":

A Study Of Jesse Stuart's Humor

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INDIANA COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH
INDIANA STATE UNIVERSITY
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THE HUMORIST OF W-HOLLOW

Knowing
The world needs more laughter—and reflection
He wrote himself a mask
To make us smile
At people who are not like us—
But feud in hill fashion
And see the devil's fearful invitation
Through the bottom of an empty jug
And touch snakes for the sake of God
After washing their feet in His Presence.
We reel at forehooves of bulls
Made into man-arms by men
Who by night lead dogs on chases
Over the chilled hills
To pursue foxes roused
From licking the wounds of a homeless mongrel;
Or invite the raincrow
With black snakes strung on a garden fence
But save the fattest fryer for the preacher—
Just in case—
In the meantime, living on ridges
Where spirits range widely
And lively women
Hold clay pipes in readiness
Once the churning's done
And farmers read their crops
In the face of the moon
On the way to dance tired feet
From furrows to fiddle tunes,
While yarnsters interrupt quaint archaisms
To lanthorn a path to bathrooms as big as outdoors.
Then we look down at dark reflections
Grinning from the Big Sandy—
Our laughter stills
And we take our place at home
In W-Hollow.

—Wade Hall

PREFACE

The Greek masks of tragedy and comedy are essentially the same mask. Only the facial lines are slightly changed to represent the two basic ways of viewing the one human situation. Aristotle acknowledged the very fine line of distinction between comedy and tragedy. The Greeks theorized as to whether one should react to the mortal predicament with frowns and tears or with smiles and laughter. With their insistence on balance, they concluded that one response to the exclusion of the other would make life intolerable and literature unrealistic.

Great writers have always depicted life as a composite of tragic (or pathetic) and comic (or farcical) materials. This admixture represents two sides of the same coin—or life—as the great Elizabethan playwrights were aware when they wrote comedies and tragedies or blended tragic and comic elements in the same play or composed tragi-comedies. Tragedy has traditionally dealt with man's moral struggle against mortal defeat. Comedy focuses on man as a social being—the ways of the world. The comic writer may respond to life with bitter satire—in the manner of the Roman poet Juvenal—or he may react more gently and compassionately—in the manner of Horace. Tragedy delineates those actions and attitudes of man that show his nobility, his greatness under stress and at death. Comedy sketches his littleness, his incongruities, his inconsistencies—in short, his laughableness. The lives of most men remind us that most of life is composed of trivia and incongruity and ludicrous acts. Consequently most of our lives—and our literature—are "comic." This is a simple assertion of the fact of life, not a condemnation of man. He is what he is. One does not like to admit, however, this truth about himself. He wants to believe that all of his life is basically meaningful and ultimately important, and he fabricates fantasies about himself. Humor, according to George Santayana, is the preception of this illusion.

Man's sense of humor, however, serves many useful purposes. It allows him to take those facets of himself which he does not like and cannot change and hold them up to ridicule and thus temper, sublimate or even temporarily deny them. Humor, then, is a constant reminder of our spotted, speckled humanity. It may arise when we perceive a character or situation that makes us uncomfortable or afraid or uneasy—as we place ourselves in another man's position—and we laugh to regain our equilibrium. Closely examined, humor is the penetration of the illusion that man's pride projects to assure him of his significance. Comic darts puncture his veneer of civilization. The overall effect is to show how ridiculous man is most of the time—not honest or heroic or kind, as he would like to think—but mostly absurd. And the resultant laughter aids him in regaining control of himself. In addition, humor is ego-satisfying. Despite his own vulnerability, man may laugh at another person's misfortunes and feel superior. Humor is also fun. It is a change from our normal mode of living—we do not smile or laugh most of the time—and it helps us release accumulated tensions.

Life in the Kentucky hills and mountains is not very different from what it is elsewhere. People get born, grow up, marry, hate, love and die. They laugh and they cry. They are proud and hypocritical. They are noble and unselfish. They fail to be what they want to be or think they are. They are as fit subjects for humor as people at any time or anywhere. A talented writer living among such people need look no further for the materials of his craft. Jesse Stuart fortunately realized this fact and has spent his life depicting the life of his people. In one of his poems he shows his awareness of the rich life surrounding him:

> The destiny of man within these pages *

When Stuart was a graduate student at Vanderbilt University, one of his professors, Donald Davidson, advised the young man to go to his people and write about them. He took the advice and returned to W-Hollow, Greenup County, Kentucky, to write about the place and people he knows thoroughly. A sonnet, written by Stuart in Nashville in 1932, contains this longing and a prophesy:

> Kentucky, I shall return to you someday

One suspects that Stuart has seldom set out to write a humorous piece. As a man who knows man's universal pretensions and foibles as they are displayed in the people of Kentucky's hill country, he intends merely to tell his "story" of the truth. And as a guffawing bystander at an auction in one of his stories tells a man who has been hornswoggled by a boy-trader who told the truth about a plug horse he had traded, "The truth was funny."

Indeed, a study of Stuart's humor is necessarily a study of his entire works, for humor permeates most of them. In a recent letter to the author of this essay, he wrote: "I can't hold out humor even if

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I'd try."[3] Professor Mary Washington Clarke in her book on Stuart's use of native materials, *Jesse Stuart's Kentucky,* notes that his "humor has reached into every corner of hill life."[4] Professor Ruel Foster has called Stuart "one of the great humorists of our literature today."[5] The humorous elements in his books are as organic and as natural as the seasons that determine so much of the hill man's life. The seasonal rhythm, in turn, controls the rise and fall of action in Stuart's novels and stories. Humor is an ingredient in all of his works—novels, short stories, essays, children's books and poetry—but it is in his short stories that humor is most consistently in evidence and predominates. Foster designates his stories as being "like great comic ballads in prose." (p. 152) Therefore, although the novels, autobiographical writings and poetry are treated in this study, the short stories are given special prominence.

The introduction below explores the setting and background for Stuart's humor and includes a discussion of his use of hill dialect, his kinship with traditional American humor and the sources of humor in his works, focusing on hill superstitions and eccentric (or colorful) characters. The mid section of the essay features the hill life as it is reflected in Stuart's humor: feuds, the land and animals, coming of age in the hills, politics and religion. Next, *Foretaste of Glory,* Stuart's most controversial novel, is analyzed at length as the best extended example of his humor and satire. A short conclusion completes the study.

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Stuart's fictional world is for many of his readers an "odd corner" of America. It is an area of Northeastern Kentucky where hills and mountains and the generally harsh terrain have helped to cut it off from the main stream of American life. Although many of his books are set during the 1920's and 1930's when Appalachia was even more isolated from the rest of the country than it is today, even when he writes of more contemporary characters and incidents he does so with an awareness that the automobile, education and the mass media have not completely eliminated the unique traits of his people. The insistent poverty in much of Appalachia—set ironically amidst one of the wealthiest regions in natural resources—has also tended to separate the area from the more prosperous parts of the nation. Herein lies much of the humorous appeal of Stuart's books for the "outlander." "Sophisticated" readers derive pleasure from reading about people they consider primitive and backward—women who smoke clay pipes, people who name and talk to their barnyard animals, men who love their dogs almost as much as their families, families who are completely unaffected by the dominant American drive for success and wealth, clans whose senseless feuds started over minor or forgotten incidents, people who worship together and fight apart, devoutly religious people, like the Forty Gallon Baptists, who begin new sects over behavioral rather than doctrinal disagreements, men serving jury duty with spittoons thoughtfully provided by the court, a woman who cures her chickens of "limber neck" with a mixture of turpentine and red pepper and adults who play a kissing game called Fine and Superfine.

Some of Stuart's stories are set in a small hill town called Greenwood or various other names, including Blakesburg and Honeywell. But most of his town characters are only slightly removed from the hills where most of his people live. The locale is essentially a closed, self-sufficient world into which the outside intrudes but seldom. A few visitors—usually people whose cars break down on their way through or relatives of hill people or revenue agents—occasionally enter his stories. Sometimes the nation's wars reach into the region to take out the young men. (In "Beyond the News in Still Hollow"[6] the local sheriff goes into the backwoods to find a boy who has not responded to his draft call. He discovers that the boy is not a draft-dodger; he simply has not heard that a war is going on. The boy's father asks innocently: "Who air we a-fightin' this time?") Most of Stuart's characters prefer to live beyond sight and sound of their neighbors. One man puts it this way: "When you live so close to a neighbor your chickens mix, take care, you are goin' to have a fallin'-out."[7]

Such people have developed—or retained from their Anglo-Saxon ancestors—their own peculiar customs and entertainments which appear amusing, perhaps naive, to the outsider. "The Bellin' of the Bride,"[8] for example, features a hill frolic in which a bride and groom are the honorees of a noisy dance-fest on their wedding night. After the belling party finds the hidden couple and makes loud noises with plow points, cow bells, wash pans, water buckets, guns and washtubs, they all go inside the house to drink, smoke and dance. The father of the groom cites biblical support for the occasion: "There is a time to dance and a time to sing and a time to marry—and a time to bell 'em." The old man also prides himself on the way he has provided for all his eleven children. He boasts that "we've give all our children a big bellin' and a heifer and a featherbed tick to start housekeepin' on." With such an auspicious start, it is not surprising that divorce is uncommon in the hills.

Another source of humor is the hill dialect that Stuart employs. Without resorting to exaggerated phonetic spelling or contrived syntax, he records the hill dialect with remarkable accuracy. Like Mark Twain, he suggests the authentic language of his characters with a carefully selected vocabulary and a minimum of dialectal spellings. (And he has tended to use the latter device less in his later works.) Words like *norrate, nigh* and *fitified* add color to his dialogue. Dialect spellings include "deestrict" (*district*), "weeked" (*wicked*), "fer" (*for*), "air" (*are*), "thar" (*there*) and "fit" (*fought*). The names he selects for his characters are rarely heard beyond the hills. In *Daughter of the Legend,* set in the mountains of East Tennessee, one family is made up of Bass, Force, Alona, Pribble, Cress, Meese, Daid and Deutsia. A Kentucky family uses names that rival those of Faulkner's Snopeses: Zelpha, Nando, Lecta, Pert, Sebie, Claradore and Starkie. In the hills a man may be called Peg and not have his masculinity questioned. The survival of archaic verb forms is noted in the dialect some of his characters speak, and a man may be "a-goin" to church where they are "a-buryin" a woman and see her feuding relatives "a-fightin" over who will say the last words over the body. Some of his characters use the archaic *hit* for *it.* Seldom, however, is the dialect difficult to understand.

It is probably in his reproduction of the natural metaphors of folk speech that Stuart achieves his greatest linguistic success. The use of metaphorical language allows the speaker to be more vivid and earthy than the educated person whose speech is filled with a plethora of adjectives and adverbs derived from Latin and Greek. In Stuart's stories a man's hair may be "the color of dying broomsage." A rabbit's blood is "the color of the frostbitten sourwood leaves." A dying man's hand is "soft and warm and wrinkled like a thawed-out blacksnake." The moon hangs over a house "like a galvanized wash pan gleamin' in the sun." A hanged man's face is "black as a pawpaw leaf." Describing the earth in early spring as the snow is melting, Stuart writes that it "looks today like a spotted hound dog's back."A man's tobacco-stained teeth "looked like new-ground stumps set in a lobber-sided horseshoe curve."A girl catches a turtle which she proclaims to be as "big as Mama's butter crock." A man is said to be "hot as a roasted tater." Almost all the metaphors used by Stuart in narration and in dialogue are taken from the hill man's environment and demonstrate his intimate involvement with it. A character indicates how quickly he will move by saying that he will be ready "in three shakes of a dead sheep's tail." When Stuart left home to go to college, he learned that the beautiful wild flower which he and his family had always called "percoon" was actually named "bloodroot." He recalls that he almost cried at the revelation: "How many poems I have written and published using the word *percoon* I don't know. I guess I have a vested interest in the word. Try using *bloodroot* in a poem."[9]

While Stuart's locale and characters may be a tributary of the mainstream, his humor is solidly in the American tradition. He relates directly to two main schools of American humor: local color and the humor of the Old Southwest. *In toto*, his work is, however, superior to that produced by any single local colorist or humorist of the Old Southwest. Like Mark Twain, he cannot be neatly categorized or restricted to one movement. The local colorists, popular during the second half of the nineteenth century, exploited with a blend of humor and pathos people living in such hinterland places as the piney woods of Georgia and Alabama, the bayous of Louisiana, the backcountry of Maine, the mining camps of the West, the mountains of Kentucky and Tennessee and the farms of the Midwest. Several of Stuart's stories and novels display the local color mixture of humor and pathos. "Corbie,"[10] for example, is the story of a feeble-minded boy who has trouble learning his alphabet but who is a snappy dresser and entertains everyone with his dancing and harmonica playing. He later entertains passerbys on the street and receives pennies, nickles and dimes. For the first half of the novel Granpa Tussie in *Taps for Private Tussie* is a comic character, but his characterization develops into an ultimately pathetic portrait. But Stuart seldom permits a story to sink completely into pathos, as so often occurred in earlier local color sketches. "April,"[11] for instance, is the story of a baby left with a couple and the return of the baby's mother to claim her daughter and to reveal that the baby's foster father is her actual father. Using a woman as narrator—a rarity in his stories—he rescues the plot from sentimentality with her folk speech and garrulouness.

On many counts Stuart's writing is a progression from the traditional local color exploitation of humble people. Whereas many earlier writers depicted them condescendingly—and often inaccurately—Stuart writes as one who knows his subject matter intimately because he has lived it. And he never treats his people and their actions as trivial. The disparity between the style of the nineteenth-century local colorists—especially in their florid narrations and descriptions—and their low-life characters is almost non-existent in Stuart. His style is an outgrowth of his material and is organically related, therefore, to his subjects. It becomes another expression of the simple life he portrays. Readers who complain that

Stuart's style is jejune and monotonous and that his characters speak grade-school English are evidently not familiar with the elemental life he chooses to write about.

Stuart's kinship with the Old Southwestern humorists and the traditions of folk humor is apparent throughout his works. In an essay he wrote for *This Is the South* in 1959, he shows his close relationship with this movement: "Our humor is often grotesque, vigorous, with dry remarks, sky-high anecdotes, and roaring, whooping exaggerations . . . . "[12] This is an excellent description of the humorous sketches written during the 1830's, '40's and '50's of the "flush times" in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Arkansas and Louisiana by such observers (most of them lawyers and professional men) as A. B. Longstreet, Johnson J. Hooper and George Washington Harris. Although these earlier writers often used a "literary" style, they attempted to record realistically the life they saw around them on the frontier. Most of their sketches were published in sporting newspapers and magazines designed for male readers. Stuart, likewise, acknowledges the masculine orientation of his work. He has recently written: "It has been pointed out by critics that I wrote from a man's viewpoint and mostly for a male audience." Not only does he not deny this contention, but adds significantly: "I am all man."[13] People who have not read Stuart extensively are unaware of the extent of his "masculine" materials and language—if that word is used to mean frank and coarse.

Obvious similarities between Stuart's hill country and the earlier Southern frontier account for many of the parallels between his writings and those of the Old Southwestern humorists. In both instances life usually means bare subsistence and is lived close to the earth. In an urban society man's aggressive traits find subtle outlets, but on the frontier and in Kentucky's hills they may erupt into fights. In one of his most widely known books, *The Thread That Runs So True,* Stuart writes that before he could assert himself as teacher at Lonesome Valley School he had to a fight a bloody, gouging battle with a nineteen-year-old first grade giant. Sometimes fights involved masses of combatants. "How Sportsmanship Came to Carver College"[14] includes a fictional version of a campus fight that occurred while he was a student at Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate, Tennessee. There were no rules in this battle between underclassmen and upperclassmen. The description is surely as rough as any fight recorded by the humorists of the Old Southwest: "Noses were bleeding, teeth were knocked loose, hands were hurt, and men were lying senseless upon the grass but the fight went on."

Tall tales are another feature of Stuart's fiction and that of the frontier humorists. Exaggerations of reality are often psychologically satisfying ways of projecting oneself beyond his often dull and destitute existence. The hunter is seldom satisfied with his actual kill. The farmer wants to grow bigger crops. In their tales, at least, they can make their own reality. Usually these tales are told as straight accounts of fact, but they are often set long ago and far away. Grandpa Tussie reminisces about the time fifty years before when he lived in Michigan, where "I saw corn grow high as that scrubby pine out there in the yard."[15] He had also driven, he says, forty yoke of oxen at one time, had trapped fifty raccoons in one day and had clubbed a bear to death. One of the few Negroes appearing in Stuart's fiction, Uncle Jarvis Stevenson is a renowned storyteller in Blakesburg. In *Foretaste of Glory* he tells of the times when a man could kill forty or fifty pigeons by finding their roosting tree and firing once with a double-barreled shotgun.[16]

Bragging and boasting are characteristics of the elemental man who is proud of his accomplishments. In *Trees of Heaven* Anse Bushman celebrates a successful crop harvest this way: "Anse steps lively in his big brogan shoes; sparks fly from the hobnails on his shoe soles when he leaps in the air and comes down on the hard planks. When Anse leaps in the air and comes back to the floor he lets out a big 'Whoopee.' The harvest is over and Anse is celebrating a rich harvest before the approaching winter."[17] But a man doesn't have to celebrate hard work to express himself this way. Liquor is a handy freer of inhibitions, as Jeff Hargis, a white-haired, three-hundred-pound alcoholic in *Foretaste of Glory*, knows. After imbibing a pint of sugar whiskey, "he would jump into the air and crack his heels together three times before he came down on the street."[18] Both excerpts could easily have been written by A. B. Longstreet to describe Georgia crackers in the 1830's.

Boasting is by no means limited to adults. Stuart's boys learn the habit early in life—probably from their fathers. "The Champion"[19] is the story of two young men who have a history of bragging about who can eat the most. The narrator tells his friend that he cannot compete now because it's "crop time" but that he has a rooster which, he bets, can eat more shelled corn than any human. Naturally, a contest ensues between the human and the rooster—and the fowl wins wings down. But the loser is a bit droopy too and becomes seriously ill. The doctor tells the defeated corn eater that during the year it will take him to recover he must eat only cornflakes and warm sweet milk three times a day. It's almost more than a body can stand. Although there is little of it in the corn story, sometimes the boasting betrays an underlying pathos. In another story a father brags about how much better hunters were in his day. On their annual Thanksgiving hunt his son outshoots him. The old man believes that his aim is off only temporarily, and he puts ambeer spit in his eyes to clear them. The remedy fails to improve his marksmanship.[20]

Structurally, much of Stuart's fiction is connected with the frontier tradition in humor. He characteristically employs a narrator (frequently a boy, Shan Powderjay) who is an observer-participant in the story. A great deal of the humor depends upon the way he tells the story. The narrator is often a digressive yarn-spinner, especially if he is an old man. Stuart's storytellers are easily reminded of tales from their colorful past. A chance word or sight will trigger a memory and a story. Old Op, the protagonist of *The Good Spirit of Laurel Ridge,* is host for a city visitor and his wife who are in the Kentucky hills hiding out from the bomb and other civilized ills. Op is none too pleased with their intrusion and billets them in the smokehouse. One day while they are sweating over their corn hoes, the visitor alludes sarcastically to "that wonderful hole in the smokehouse" roof through which rain will inevitably pour—should it ever rain. The unsuspecting alien hardly anticipated the torrent of words that his innocent remark would bring forth. Stuart writes: "His sarcasm was lost on Op, who was thinking about a hole in another roof. 'A hole in the roof is what almost ruint Pap onct.' Op, resting on his hoe handle, took one of his deep storytelling breaths."What follows is a tale to vie with yarns told by two of Mark Twain's creations: Simon Wheeler of "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" and Jim Baker of "Baker's Blue-Jay Yarn." Op proceeds to spin a yarn out in the steaming cornfield about a revival at the Freewill Baptist Church that had been going on "hot and heavy" for a month. One night, Brother Addie Smallwood stands up to testify, pleading with the Lord to "come down from yer Heaven and be with us tonight. Come down through the roof . . . and right down through the ceilin'. We don't mind, Lord. We'll repair the roof." About that time, Brother Adger, dressed in a long white nightshirt and sporting his long, sandy-colored beard, slips into the church and asks: "Wouldn't it be better to walk in at the door, Brother Smallwood?" The sinners—and some good church people too—under conviction of sin, start jumping through the windows (sashes and all) and flee into the darkness. The less terrified souls gather around the bogus lord and fall at his feet. Op continues: "If Brother Adger hadn't had a birthmark on his cheek, a little gray scaly tripe where he was marked by a lizard, I don't know what might've happened. I think he might've come back agin and taken the church over and converted everybody." Fortunately, someone recognized the mark just in time to prevent such a catastrophe. Now Op makes the connection between his original association of the holey smokehouse roof with his father's near financial disaster. His Pap, he says, almost went broke trying to save Brother Adger from being convicted for disturbing public worship. But the story isn't over. At his trial the fake savior's only defense was: "I wanted to see whether they really did want the Lord, Our Saviour, to visit 'em or not." Evidently, he found out. Certainly the city guest found out that almost any remark could trigger a story from Old Op's rich memory.[21]

In the absence of commercial instruments of entertainment, country people are forced to be inventive in their sports and fun-making. Hunting is, of course, the favorite avocation (though it has its practical side too in the fresh meat it renders) of men and boys. A sport not unlike the gander-pullings of the frontier is depicted in "Frog-Trouncin' Contest."[22] In this story a young boy trains himself, under his uncle's direction, to be a champion frog-trouncer and winner of first prize, a bull. Popular with all ages and both sexes, dozens of people would gather in a grove of trees to watch the contest among the district's best frog-trouncers The boy-narrator remembers the excitement: "Pa said he'd never seen so many at a political rally, Children's Day, footwashin' or a Baptist Association." The boy then describes the way the sport was conducted: "The frog-trouncer was a heavy plank balanced on a wooden horse like a teeter-totter. On one end the toad frog was placed and was tied there, so it couldn't jump with a white thread. [sic] The man trouncin' the frog hit the other end of the trouncer with his mallet and it sent the frog toward the sky and when the frog fell to the ground, it was dead as four o'clock. One had to hit the trouncer exactly right to send the frog straight into the air; if he didn't hit it right, the frog would go sidewise." The sport was so popular and so many frogs were used up in practice, it is remarkable that survivors could be found for the actual contests. An Old Southwestern gander-pulling was hardly a more brutal sport. Usually only one gander was sacrificed as men mounted on horseback would gallop under a goose, greased and suspended from a tree limb, and attempt to jerk its head off.

Another brutal entertainment popular with almost everyone was a public hanging. They may have been more common on the frontier, but they were still practiced in the early twentieth century. "Another Hanging,"[23] connected with the older humor in subject and in oral structure, relates "one of the best hangin's this country has ever seen." According to the nostalgic storyteller, it had occurred in 1903 when he was a boy. He remembers the carnival atmosphere, with excursion trains bringing in hundreds of spectators to see the big event. The schools had been dismissed so the young people could attend. Like most of the other boys, the storyteller had bought new clothes for the occasion because he thought he might be able to get in some courting. And truly he did. On the train loaded with the holiday crowd, he meets a beautiful young girl and "sparks" her throughout the gruesome spectacle. Just as the trap door is sprung, his new-found sweetheart exclaims: "This is a real hangin' . . . . It's the best hangin' I ever saw, Honey." As usual, the hanging was executed at sunrise, and the people were impatient to see it done so they could get home to their chores and other sports. The old man recalls with relish the falling of the body through the trap door, then adds dispassionately: "It was gettin' about milkin' time now and the hangin' was over." The rush to the train was so maddening, his girl friend-for-a-day sadly laments: "It's got so bad here you just can't have a decent hangin' any more . . . . " Much of the gallows humor in this story derives from the personality of the narrator, who tells the tale without compassion for the condemned man and who still enjoys reliving the event in memory.

A farce called "Battle with the Bees" utilizes the painful humor of a George Washington Harris, whose "Sicily Burns's Wedding" relates a bee-maddened bull that gets into a house and routs a wedding in progress. In Stuart's story a wife and her son contrive a stratagem to cure the boy's father of his passion for bees. The boy is embarrassed by his father's monomania: "No wonder all our neighbors called Pa 'Drone,' Mom 'Queen Bee' and my oldest sister 'Honey.' They called my second sister 'Beeswax' and my baby sister 'Little Honey.' I was called 'Little Drone' and my brother was called 'Beebread.' " In addition, members of the family were always being stung by bees that swarmed in the yards. One day a neighbor's hogs rampage through the yard upturning the beehives. The resulting mayhem cures the father of his love for bees, or rather he will be—once he recovers from his bee stings. Fortunately, he never learns that his son and wife were responsible for the loose hogs.

Another Stuart sketch in the painful-humor tradition is "Nearly Tickled to Death."[25] A fourteen-year-old boy tells of the time his father was almost driven crazy by a persistent buzzing in his ear.. Small wonder.

The father's ear houses a beetle. The mother tries all sorts of home remedies—but alas, to no avail. The poor victim develops St. Vitus' Dance all over his body and is about ready for the Ultimate Cure—when the boy recommends that they try sucking the sadistic pest out with the floor sweeper. It works..

Related to the tall tale in American humor is the hoax. Backwoods people take great delight in fabricating and sustaining an elaborate structure of lies. "Powderday's Red Hen"[26] is a masterpiece of the genre. Two country boys, Shan and Finn Powderday, develop and "norrate" a fantastic story about a hen they own that crows and cusses. When a group of gullible town boys (including an overweight cripple) trudge the several miles into the country to witness this phenomenon, Finn reports sadly that they had to kill her because she had recently misbehaved at Sunday dinner, cussing their preacher and his family and shaming all the Powderdays. It was hard to give her up, he laments, but such indiscreet behavior by one of their chickens could not be tolerated—at least not when the preacher was present. Naturally, the city boys believe every word.

Finally, mythmaking is a characteristic of folk humor. Larger than life characters are familiar to the frontiersman who can take a thread of fact and weave an elaborate superman. One of Stuart's best stories, "A Land Beyond the River,"[27] is predominantly tragic; nevertheless, it relates directly to frontier humor. The focus character is the captain of a river raft train, "Big-Sandy Bill who'd never died and never will." His life and legends, recounted by his son, remind one of an almost mythical ante-bellum riverman, Mike Fink.

As a study of the body of Stuart's works reveals, he has had to tone down the live reality of his subject matter in order to give his fiction a verisimilitude among many of his readers. In the introduction to a collection of short stories published in 1964, he admits to a dilution of the facts: "Since readers will not believe the truth, I have had to mix some fiction with my animal, turtle, snake, and bee stories."[28] Despite Stuart's muting of reality, there are still readers who shake their heads in disbelief when confronted with Stuart's fictional world. The fact is that almost all of the Kentuckian's works are based in fact. The idea for the collection of poetry he called *Album of Destiny* came to him while he was looking through an old family picture album. Many of his stories are recordings of tales he heard relatives and friends tell in Greenup County, Kentucky. "Battle with the Bees," discussed above, is one such story originally told him by an uncle. In addition to their roles in his autobiographical narratives, members of his childhood family—and especially his father—have served him as models for fictional characters. The Powderjay family (sometimes spelled Powderday) is a direct outgrowth of his own boyhood family and experiences. From the beginning he has written about the people he knows. Before he was eleven he wrote stories or "themes" at Plum Grove School, as he remembers, "about my classmates and older people." And in the beginning he was writing natural humor: "And when I finished reading a theme before my class, my teacher and classmates were laughing."[29] With few exceptions, his works are set in the hill country where he was born and still lives.

Collectively, his books are evidence of his use of native materials and testify to the truth of a recent assertion that "I have memorized my entire valley."[30]

A sage man once said that a joke is the most serious thing in the world. A humorist generally exposes man's frailties in order that they might be corrected or lessened. Such humor often takes the form of satire. Stuart's fiction and poetry abound in satirical thrusts at man's shortcomings in religion, personal relations, education, justice—even international relations. Mongrel Mettle, a dog fable, exposes man's infidelities and cruelties to other men as well as to animals. In *Trees of Heaven* a land eviction case causes a courtroom ruckus and the judge is forced to declare a mistrial. Uncharacteristically direct, Stuart paints the setting for hill justice: "Behind the Judge are the pictures of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. If these venerable men could only see hill justice in the land they helped to shape, make breathe as a nation—the most powerful under the sun—if they could only listen! Better they cannot!"[31] "August" is a parabolic satire on war in which red and black ants battle each other until they are all dead.[32] Using grimly appropriate satire, Stuart reveals man's inhumanity to man in his several hanging stories. In "Sunday Afternoon Hanging,"[33] for example, an old man tells his grandson about the good old days when men were hanged publicly in Blakesburg, known then as Hang-Town. After church each Sunday he would go to the old elm near town where the weekly hanging took place: "It was as much fun to see a hanging them days as it is to see a baseball game nowadays in Kentucky." The people insisted on a hanging every Sunday, and a sheriff and judge who failed to provide at least one performance each month were never re-elected. The grandfather recalls one joyful occasion when five men were hanged as the band played "Dixie" and women fainted and dogs fought among the spectators. But now there's only baseball for one's Sunday afternoon fun.

Stuart's poetry contains a strong satirical element. In "Bull Blakesnake Defends His Race" a snake attacks man for denigrating his good name by calling other men "snakes." Snakes, he maintains, are in many ways superior to man. For instance, unlike man, "We snakes go through our lives each with one lover." The snake concludes his plea:

> Dear fellow man with habits more to blame,

In other poems Stuart gives a voice to the grass, lizards, scorpions and snakes and allows them to speak smugly and boastfully of their importance in the universe—in the manner of men.

Farce is an important element in Stuart's fiction. Some of his stories are pure farce. "Pa's a Man's Man All Right"[35] is about an egg farmer who thinks it's good business to brag about how he controls and tyrannizes his wife. One night a weasel gets into his henhouse and he's about to shoot it when his wife screams for him not to shoot for fear of hitting the children. The neighbors hear only her plea for him not to shoot. They spread the word that he was trying to kill his wife. His egg sales plummet to zero until his wife begins to accompany him on sales trips to assure everyone that she is alive and unabused.

As previously suggested in another connection, the charm of many of Stuart's stories accrues from the personality of the narrators. This characteristic of his fiction is crucial to his success as a storyteller. Based on an actual incident, "No Petty Thief"[36] reads like a tall tale of a man who stole a steam shovel from a road-building crew and hid it in his tobacco barn. When rains halt construction on the first roads in the county, the narrator dismantles the huge machine and takes it piece by piece over a mountain to his barn where he reassembles it. To this day the culprit isn't sure why he did it—unless it was because of "the rains coming early or my love for wheels and machinery." He is finally apprehended, but the jury refuses to believe the story until he takes them to the barn and shows them the shovel hidden behind his tobacco. He is given seven years and a day for grand larceny. He concludes his story: "The road builders fit me hard, too, fer they had to build a road story: "The road builders fit me hard, too, fer they had to build a road enough to carry it back." The incident itself is, of course, comical, but most of the humor arises from the innocent pride the narrator still has in his unbelievable feat and from his unreconstructed attitude toward the caper.

Most of Stuart's poetry is somber in tone and deals principally with death. Many of his poems are like a Kentucky *Spoon River Anthology*, with the dead speaking from the grave. A few of them feature man's comic mortal foibles. "Harry Dartmore" is a study of female promiscuity from a man's viewpoint. A loose damsel has been put in the family way by someone, and the speaker wants to know if he is responsible:

> But sure as the autumn winds blow leaves about,
>
> I'd like to know if I'm the man to blame.[37]

Woman's fickle nature (allegedly) is also the subject of "Emanuel Frainwood," who tries to understand why his wife of many years has suddenly left him:

> A funny thing the way my wife has done
>
> . . .

A *carpe diem* view of life is taken in "Wilson Smack to Young John Spry." An older man chides a youth for his serious attitude because when a man reaches his winter years, he is less able to enjoy life:

> Then why be serious when Spring has room
> To love, dream, work, to laugh and play, my friend?[39]

"Free Ride" is an example of Stuart's infrequent society verse. In rhyming three-stress lines, the poem chronicles the airplane ride of a fly from Texas to Chicago, where he is met by the object of his flight, a female fly—but of course.[40]

The foregoing discussion has touched upon many of the sources of Stuart's humor. Two principal sources remain: superstition and eccentric characters—though they, too, have been alluded to. The seriously held superstitions of the hill folk are comic to the unbeliever. Stuart's father, like his neighbors, lived by signs. He planted and harvested his crops when the signs were favorable. Certain people in the community were believed to have miraculous curative powers. A man in *Hie to the Hunters* is the seventh child of the third generation and is therefore able to "blow three times in a baby's mouth and cure the thrash."[41] Everyone who is acquainted with turtles and terrapins knows that they will bite humans who threaten them. The hill man believes that they will bite and keep on biting until it thunders or until the sun goes down—whichever comes first.

Ghosts are as real to some country people as are flesh-and-blood people. "Walk in the Moon Shadows"[42] tells of a woman who dresses up her two children to take them to a deserted house in the dead of night to present them to the ghosts of two friends who died many years before in a flu epidemic. But this behavior is not unusual for the woman. She has made this nocturnal visit each time before she gave birth to a baby. Sometimes marriages are made by sorcery. "Fitified Man"[43] is the story of a man bewitched by a woman who wants to marry him. Her witchery has caused him to get down in his hogpen and eat with his swine. He has been made to try to stand on his head atop a whiskey jug. His cows have been bewitched dry, and his mules have been enchanted to walk on their hind feet like a man. The poor victim finally has "kilt the Devil" in the woman by shooting her picture with a silver bullet. Obviously impressed that she would go so far as to sell her soul to the devil to win him, the man decides that the unpossessed woman would make a good wife for him. As a neighbor leaves his newly cured friend and ex-witch lover, he observes a slight incongruity: the bewitching had taken place in the shadow of Plum Grove Church.

Hill people not only live by signs; they die by them. In *Taps for Private Tussie* Grandpa Tussie has a premonition of his death. A dying moonshiner in "When Mountain Men Make Peace"[44] swears to another man that death has appeared to him during a recent storm in the shapes of a turkey buzzard and an old bearded man. Another storm approaches and he directs his sons to take him outside, where he sees again his buzzard of death in a nearby oak—and dies.

People are the source of all humor. Needless to say, plants and animals do not find themselves or each other funny. Only man laughs at his nature—or perhaps only he needs to. Because of exaggerated personal traits or eccentricities, some people are more comic than others. At least their humorous behavior is more visible. In his some thirty-five books Stuart has created a gallery of comic characters, and to the reader they are all the more humorous because they are not usually aware that they are "different" from everyone else. Or if they are aware, they do not care enough about others' opinions to conform to more normal patterns of conduct. Writing in the introduction to one of his short stories, Stuart uses a nature analogy to suggest a reason for the number of his humorous characterizations: "I have found more colorful characters in the country, village, and small town than I have found in the large city . . . . Have you seen a vast forest where the trees are close together? They grow tall and much alike. But in the fields where there are small clumps of trees, they grow up in a dozen different ways for they have more freedom in which to grow. Now, isn't this true of people?"[45] Indeed, men who are barely within "hollering distance" of each other have room in which to develop and express their individuality.

Most hill people—even the lazy ones—live a hard life. They work hard and play hard. They live close to the land and consequently close to death. When they see crops and animals and people die near them, they are reminded of their own brief tenure. Some of them concentrate in laying up treasure in heaven. Some of them live for today. In the poem, "Red Holbrook," the speaker calls for intense living: "On with the dance before we mortals pass."[46] The hill man's fondness for liquor is in part an attempt to live an intensified life. In his poem, "Whirley Pratt" also defends heavy drinking as a means of forgetting the cornfields, the fights and hard times: "We're filled with gay carousal and good cheer, / With all our troubles, debts and deeds at rest."[47]

Stuart's collection of colorful characters includes men who live quiet and apparently ordinary lives. Old Op, for example, lives a solitary life among his "sperets" on Laurel Ridge. (His solitude is briefly interrupted in *The Good Spirit of Laurel Ridge.*) In a short story, "The Champions,"[48] he is shown to be a very proud man who works hard and connives to defeat the champion corn sprout cutter in the county. Old Alec is another quiet-living man. "Alec's Cabin"[49] tells of his decision to tear down the cabin he built on someone else's land years before. His grown children have returned to live with him, and he needs more room. It makes sense for him to use the lumber in his old cabin and take it with him when he moves to build larger quarters—despite the fact that he doesn't hold title to it.

The hill man's legendary independence is the source of much of his color. In his spiritual autobiography, *The Year of My Rebirth,* Stuart describes his own father-in-law, Emmit Norris, as "a highly independent man." Because the city fathers refuse to construct a flood wall, he decides to take matters into his own hands to keep his home from flooding. After he tries unsuccessfully to get his neighbors in the river town of Greenup to cooperate in his flood protection project, he works alone to jack up his house high enough to build a basement above the ground. Stuart reports that Norris' house now sits above his neighbors on a small hill, but unlike them he is high and dry when it floods.[50]

This love of independence often runs afoul of the law. When told that the law requires that children be sent to school, Grandpa Tussie in *Taps for Private Tussie* declares indignantly: "The Law is a dangerous thing." (p. 209) A lot of his neighbors agree with him. Although young men from the hills usually serve their country willingly in uniform, they sometimes have trouble conforming to military discipline. And like their Civil War forebears, they may decide to return home without benefit of leave. In "Does the Army Always Get Its Man?"[51] a platoon of soldiers, sailors and marines try vainly to find a man who is enjoying his fourth AWOL. The reluctant soldier disguises himself in his mother's old dresses when he goes out in public, and his night-time adventures earn him the title of Plum Grove Ghost. But the army is not about to be defeated by one of its own soldiers. The young soldier-in-hiding falls in love with a saleswoman who calls by his father's house. The love is apparently mutual, and the young couple go to church to be married. There the authorities arrest him and reveal that the saleslady is actually a WAVE in sweetheart's clothing.

Typically, the hill man eschews commercial whiskey in favor of the home-made varieties. And there are always independent businessmen who are willing to cater to his tastes. "Evidence Is High Proof"[52] is a matching of wits between a prosperous moonshiner-bootlegger and the revenue agents. In this instance, the government man wins the contest when he confuses the moonshiner's signals to his distillers in the hills. The revenuer may have won a battle, but as soon as the moonshiner is released from jail, we can be assured that the war will be resumed. Both sides seem to enjoy it.

The sense of family loyalty is strong among hill people, and sometimes a poor man will do almost anything to keep his family in food. A six-foot-five-inch, one hundred-thirty-five pound man tells in "No Hero"[53] how he saved his family from starvation by wrestling a 386-pound caged bear and earning $225.00. The story is threatened with an ocean of pathos until the stick-and-skin narrator confesses that he was never in danger. The reason? He had once owned a pet bear and remembered that he liked to be rubbed between the ears and on the stomach. The caged bear also found it soothing. The bear conqueror admits: "I suppose it wasn't exactly fair, but Mollie and the kids had to eat." Who can argue tactics under the circumstances?

An epitaph poem, "Toad Hall," depicts a red-haired, small-headed, large-footed and handed, five-foot tall gravedigger who lived with his mother until his death before he was fifty. The tentative pathos of the sonnet is completely dissipated by the concluding couplet: "For Toad lived with his mother on the hill./ Had he lived on, he'd been a bachelor still."[54] Hill men need women to cook their meals, milk their cows, bear the children they need for field hands and to do various other chores around the house. But like Toad not all of them are willing to submit to the marriage yoke. "Foreacre Hunt" records a man's rejection of his lady suitor. He explains: "No life for me entwined in marriage ropes,/ A walled-in house and cash and care to drive." Married men, he believes, "put their manhood in air-tight jars." He prefers to live alone with his books, hounds, guns and woods.[55]

Women, of course, want a healthy man to take to husband. But in time of war they may be pleased that their men have certain minor physical defects that make them draft-exempt. "Lester Pratt Sends Heliotrope Hix His Love" is a verse letter a man writes his sweetheart from the West Virginia mine where he's aiding the defense effort during World War II. Lester has been declared militarily unfit due to various unfortunate (or fortunate—depending upon one's view of military service) mishaps. The poem is prefaced by this catalogue of violent encounters: "Classified 4-F: punctured eardrum (hit on ear with a rock), one kidney lost (by over-drinking bad moonshine), loss of index finger on right hand (bitten off in fight with Ural Moore), loss of one eye (shot out in a fight at church by Harlow Moore)."[56] Such a man may be better at courting by long distance than close up.

A man's natural attachment to animals—especially dogs—is a source of many of Stuart's humorous characterizations. But some men are attracted to mules. Mule-love is surely practical, if not normal, because without the stubborn beasts to do their plowing and pulling farmers could hardly subsist. One such man, Red Mule, is the subject of a short story and a children's book discussed later. Apparently the same man under a different name is the focus of a poem, "Muley Williams." The mule-lover announces his passion in the opening lines: "If mules can't go to Heaven, let me out./ O' Lordy, Lord—just let me rot right here." Luckily, he convinces himself that "mules will get to Heaven" and that he will be able to drive his mules over the same old shaded roads he has known here below.[57]

The wonderful world of animals, however, occasionally intrudes into man's secret retreat. "Both Barrels"[58] is a story that could be entitled "The Fight of the Bumble Bee." It portrays a twenty-four-year-old ne'er-do-well who cares for only one thing: lying under the apple tree on his parents' farm in the spring and cultivating his "natural mind." He admits candidly—and languidly: "I could lie right here under my apple tree without a cent of money in my pocket and no food, and if I got hungry enough I could eat green grass first, then I could change my diet to green apple leaves." The young man has acquired his favorite pastime honestly, for the entire family is smitten with the lounging bug. Only the mother is very good at doing any work—and she has to. Somebody has to. One day, however, the young *bon vivant* has his spring idyll disturbed by a bumble bee that begins to dive bomb toward him as he reclines on the grass. After repeated attempts to come to a truce with the insect, he goes in anger to get his father's double-barrel shotgun. Finally, he has opened up a large hole through the leaves to the sky and all is quiet again on the green battle front.

Another colorful character who is also sorry and good for nothing, it seems, is Old Hawgie Cawhorn of "The Rainy Day at Big Lost Creek."[59] His main cares are his dogs, hunting and having a good time. He is so lovable other people do his work for him. Even they are attracted to his easy-going philosophy of life. Then one night it seems that an avenging Providence strikes at him through a flood that bursts a dam near his cabin and sweeps it away. The more provident neighbors mourn his sad demise—until he returns from a mountain top where he and his family have been hunting while the flood was raging below. He explains how he again slipped by the scythe of the Grim Reaper: "Fox huntin' up on high places among the stars is the safest thing in the world . . . . " And who can argue with such a fun-filled life of leisure that even the gods evidently approve.

Uncle Jeff is yet another character who knows how to live a sorry but good life. He is a sixty-year-old, three-hundred-and-seven-pound sot. In "A Stall for Uncle Jeff"[60] his nephew retrieves the old man from a neighbor's barn stall from which he has evicted the cow. Jeff's brother-in-law vehemently opposes the intrusion of the drunkard, vowing that he would rather live with a copperhead than with Uncle Jeff. Nevertheless, for a while blood is thicker than the marriage bonds, and Jeff's sister insists that he live with them. In between binges he is a good worker, but finally the narrator's father is satiated with his unpredictability and leaves home, returning only when Uncle Jeff has been evicted. Uncle Jeff may be an unsteady worker, but he always manages to provide himself with a winter home—at the tax-payer's expense in the city jail. But in "Uncle Jeff and the Family Pride"[61] the old man finds his winter quarters changed. He is forced to wear a ball and chain and clean the city streets. Uncle Jeff's sister and her family are, as expected, humiliated; and with the tacit approval of the deputy sheriff, Uncle Jeff escapes, having learned his lesson and regained his pride. For a while anyway.

Sherwood Anderson made the "grotesque" character famous in *Winesburg, Ohio.* His grotesques are usually kind people who have exaggerated physical or personal traits that set them apart from other persons. As is already evident, Stuart has many similar characters. The title character in "Ezra Alcorn and April"[62] is a well-intentioned man who merely has a peculiar, uncontrollable urge. Every April he develops an irresistible desire to hit people (but only men over twenty-one) and then record the names of his victims in a little book he carries. According to Stuart, there once lived such a man in his home county. A champion corn-hoer in "For the Love of Brass"[63] also has an unusual fixation. He cannot resist the temptation to steal brass. He removes the brass rings from his employer's harness hames and the brass parts of the washboards. Finally, the sheriff comes to take him to prison for the fourth time when he steals the brass from a train engine. He has already spent twenty-one of his forty-two years behind bars because of his overbearing passion.

Not even the bench is spared its grotesque characters. "Judge Ripper's Day"[64] is about an eighty-two-year-old judge who has himself raised in his rocking chair into the limbs of a giant elm where he reviews and revises his judicial pronouncements. As he recalls each crucial decision, he pulls a leaf from the tree and lastly he pulls one for himself as he descends to await the final Judge—hopefully with his life now in order.

Despite their familiarity with death, the final summons can be a frightening one for hill people. "Fast-Train Ike"[65] relates the story of a man who has been predicting his death in a train wreck for forty-nine years. His fears are realized. The focus character in "As a Man Thinketh"[66] is not afraid of anything on earth—but fire. He can take up a poisonous snake and choke him to death with his bare hands. But he panicks around people who smoke, and he quits his good job at a nearby powder plant for fear of an explosion and fire. Grimly appropriate, he is burned to death when lightning ignites the hay in his barn. As a man thinketh.

Once a man is dead, his family has a moral responsibility to honor his final wishes regarding the disposition of his remains. An old man in "Betwixt Life and Death"[67] has his grotesque desires obeyed when he dies in winter. He has insisted that his body be kept in the garret till it can be decently buried in the spring. His other directions are also followed religiously. He wants a "settin-up"—complete with drinking and dancing—one night each week until his burial. In addition, he directs that his granddaughters wear certain dresses he has designated to be ordered from the mail-order catalogue. In June, when the coffin is opened in preparation for the delayed burial, it is discovered that the cold weather and a layer of salt have preserved the old man remarkably well. Members of his far-flung family gather for the funeral, and predictably a fight breaks out at the cemetery. But that's all right, according to one member of the family: "It's a good sign that the Grayhouse blood ain't losin' its color." Indeed, it is not. It still runs red.

A boy tells his father's serio-comic story in "Seventy-Six Days."[68] A man has entered a contest to eat a quail a day for seventy-six days. After finishing off his fifty-ninth bird, he dies of lead poisoning contracted from birdshot. His tombstone is now suitably decorated with the likeness of a quail. Another man, in "Bird-Neck,"[69] sells his body to medical science and then craftily saves it for the birds. The eighty-year-old codger realizes that he can't have much longer to live and receives $25.00 to leave his remains to a hospital. Apparently he has second thoughts about such a macabre way of disposing of his house of flesh. He cheats the medical dissectors by climbing a tree and hanging himself so the birds can eat his flesh. Presumably, he concluded that turnabout is fair play.

A woman who is even more grotesque in death than in life—if that is possible for her—is the lady protagonist of "Sylvania Is Dead."[70] Later rewritten as an episode in *Daughter of the Legend,* the story relates the life and end of a six-hundred-fifty-pound female bootlegger who is married to a tiny man named Skinny with whom she lives and dies atop a mountain. Her position in life is completely invulnerable to the revenuers because she is too large to carry through the cabin door. She loves to taunt the frustrated lawmen who come to arrest her: "You'll haf to get me out'n the house first . . . . Atter you get me out'n the house, how are you goin' to get me down off the mountain?" She had a point they took seriously. But sadly, not even Sylvania's monstrous size could protect her from Mortal Law, and her faithful booze customers lament her going in tearful, liquor-fortified farewells. Then, after lengthy deliberations, they tear down the chimney and fourteen men carry her coffin to her grave. The bootlegging industry must have suffered a severe crisis when she went.

Uglybird Skinner's death was, truly, a sad one. His exit left his neighbors with one less character to laugh at. When he was alive, he allowed people to think that he was an odd man who beat up his wife regularly. He played practical jokes on himself that made him look ridiculous. Once he had himself a suit made of cement sacks. His unadorned appearance was comical, as he knew: "I've got a head the shape of a pear turned upside down. And I've got a big mouth, teeth that a dentist can't pull, big moose jaws, and shoulders as broad as a corncrib door. Got eyes that slant and everybody who looks at me thinks I'm awfully ugly." Then why did he contrive to make himself an even more absurd figure? He answers: "I'll make everybody laugh. What the world needs is a little more laughter." As the gravedigger on Lonesome Hill, he had seen so much grief that he resolved to do what he could to cheer people. Then his beloved wife died and his comic facade crumbled. Soon he too returned to the dust. For a brief moment in time he played the clown because he knew people needed it. Underneath his jester's garb Uglybird Skinner was beautiful. Perhaps "The Reaper and the Flowers"[71] is Stuart's tribute to the humorist.

Stuart's only novel set outside the Kentucky hills is *Daughter of the Legend.*[72] It is a fact-filled story of a peculiar people, the Melungeons who live on a mountain in East Tennessee. These beautiful, dark-skinned people are victims of Anglo-Saxon prejudice. Because not even they know their ancestry, their "white" neighbors consider them "niggers" and treat them accordingly. One legend holds them to be survivors of Carthage after the Romans had destroyed it before the Christian era. The narrator, Dave Stoneking, is a white woodcutter who falls in love with and marries a Melungeon girl, Deutsia Huntoon. He bears the scorn of the white people in the nearby village but lives an idyllic life with his tawny-skinned wife and her people until she dies in childbirth. Then he leaves his son with his Melungeon grandparents and returns to his own people. Despite the fascination the colorful Melungeons have for the reader, this is probably Stuart's least successful novel. The narrator appears incredibly naive. Although the plot is based in fact and is credible, it sometimes tends to melodrama. At times Stuart's plea for justice for the mistreated Melungeons makes him sound more like a polemicist than a novelist. Deutsia's death inundates the ending with unrelieved pathos. Nevertheless, in this novel Stuart has created in Deutsia one of his most vivid and winsome female characters. Stuart's fictional foray into an alien land was a mixed success.

For people to whom the hill life is strange, virtually all Stuart's characters must seem a bit eccentric—including the factual characterizations of members of his own family. The writer's paternal grandfather spent much of his life feuding and fighting and fathering nineteen children. In "Elegy for Mitch Stuart" the grandson suggests an appropriate epitaph:

Here lies old Mitch Stuart

The Van Horns were the elder Stuart's feuding opponents—until he "thinned" their clan.

Other than his own experiences, the person whose life Stuart has most often drawn upon is his father, Mick. Jesse used to be called "God's oddling" by his father. Mick would explain that Jesse was "odd" because he went away to school, became a writer, and didn't drink or smoke. On the subject of tobacco, the source of livelihood (and pleasure) for many farmers—and the source of much controversy—Mick would say: "My Pap used terbacker and my Ma used it. I use it. James [Stuart's brother] uses it. Your Ma uses it. You don't. Odd, ain't it?"[73] Jesse's reason for eschewing the habit was different from most of the local opponents of tobacco who considered it the devil's weed. One crusader in *God's Oddling* maintains that before a man can get to heaven, he has "to change the color of his spit." (p. 161)

Jesse was, indeed, "odd." But when he came to write "the one book I have wanted most to write all my life," the story of his father, Jesse Stuart called the biography *God's Oddling*. Mick was a man of the hills and a complete individualist. His love for the land led Jesse to call him "an uneducated poet of the earth." The illiterate man was a coal miner, tenant farmer, and railroad section hand. He held deeds to only fifty acres of land during his lifetime, but he "owned" all the land he saw. He loved it and tried to live in harmony with it.

Ruel Foster has called *God's Oddling* "a kind of 'Life with Father' suffused with humor and touched with the somberness of the hard life of the hills."[74] It is true that much of the book deals with hard work, sorrow, pain and pathos—the all-too-prominent elements of Mick's life. But in this book and in his other writings about his father, Jesse has used his father as a model of the man who lives in right relationship with his fellow man and with the land. The humor in these sketches is gentle and loving, and almost never is Mick made the object of satire. In the title story from *Clearing in the Sky*,[75] for example, Mick is told by his doctor that his health is so bad he should not even try to walk the length of a city block. Instead, the old man walks the five miles back home over a mountain and later leads his son to a mountain top clearing in 97° temperature to show him his vegetable garden. The father has good reason not to worry too much about the doctor's warning. He had been given the same advice forty years before. Hard work and good habits had made the little man extremely resistant to old age maladies.

The end does inevitably come for even the best, and Stuart records his father's death in *The Year of My Rebirth* and in *God's Oddling*. On his deathbed the old poet of the land is more concerned with making sure that the farm chores are attended to than with what is about to happen to him. His final instructions begin with a request not to dispose of his farm animals: "Keep Doc, Bess and Lollipop, Whitie. And don't sell Tony. You keep him.' Then he asked us not to forget to grease the wagon wheels, make a new wagon bed, and put new blocks on the brakes. He told us to be sure to put cup grease in the horse-drawn disk harrows, to plow and disk the garden early, to clean up all the barnyard manure and get it onto the fields, to spread lime on the meadow, to go over the fences and to check water holes in the pastures."[76] It must have been a comfort to the dying man to know that his wishes would be respected and that his influence would survive him. As Stuart was writing *God's Oddling*, he says he discovered that "I had already been writing it all my life . . . . " Truly he had been. And he has drawn on his father—as well as other members of his family and his neighbors—in the creation of some of the most memorable characters in American fiction.

FUSSING AND FEUDING

The hills of Eastern Kentucky afford a man meager subsistence—unless of course, he happens to be a coal mine operator or owner of mineral rights. The land for farming is often infertile and rocky and the tillable acreage is limited. In order for a man to survive he must be competitive and his family must support him in all that he does. Under such conditions, conducive to survival only of the fittest, it was natural for individuals to assert their rights and to fight anyone who dared encroach upon them. It was also natural for members of the same families to support one another in their encounters with outsiders. Conditions were right—or wrong—for the growth of feuds. And grow they did. A feud might start with an innocent remark or overture from one man to another man's wife. "A Yard of String"[77] depicts a birthday party during which one man fights another man for taking what he considers too many liberties with his wife. Stuart does not say that this is the beginning of a feud, but many feuds of long standing started over incidents hardly more serious.

When a person marries, or aspires to marry, into a feuding family, it is necessary that his spouse's enemies become his enemies as well. During a courtship a little physical action directed at the other side can only further a young man's suit. "The Basket Dinner"[78] is about a man who helps his sweetheart's family win a mass fight at a church dinner and thus wins his right to become a member of the family. The Dingus and Bridgewater families have been feuding for years. They attend the same church but sit on opposite sides of the building. Even the graveyard is segregated by family, with a line of trees separating the enemies in death. The church building may be off-limits for a feud fight—but not the cemetery. In this bloody encounter the men are ably assisted by the women and children. Clothes are torn off, tombstones are overturned, and the ground is covered with blood and broken dishes from the church dinner. No one is slain in this battle, but the location was convenient had there been a casualty.

Some families seem to thrive on feuds, as some nations thrive on wars. The Hammertights, for instance, will start a feud at the drop of a word. Of course, they are not always the original instigators of violence. Their neighbors find it easy to hate the prolific Hammertights. In "Zeke

Hammertight"[79] a man announces that what is wrong with the hill country is that "It's overrun with sassafras sprouts and the Hammertights." Another observer remarks: "The wars can't kill them; the drouths can't starve them out; the earth can be cruel to them or kind to them . . . but they keep on coming." Other neighbors laugh at their small heads, "no bigger than drinking-gourds," and attribute the deformity to inbreeding. Finally, the Hammertight enemies persuade the sheriff to aid them in capturing the leader of the clan, and the old man is taken to an asylum.

Today's close friends may be tomorrow's feuding adversaries. "When Mountain Men Make Peace"[80] is the story of a dying man who wants to die forgiven by those he has wronged. He sends for his estranged moonshining partner and confesses that he has made love to his ex-friend's wife. The cuckhold curses his erstwhile business associate and threatens to kill him should he not die a natural death. He does.

Feuds are absurdly wasteful in lives and wealth. The young narrator of "Hell's Acre"[81] realizes the stupidity of his family's feud with their neighbors over a single acre of land. The dispute has been going on for many years in the courts and in the woods and fields. Many lives have been sacrificed, men have been permanently maimed and thousands of dollars have been spent. Taking a "furlough" from the fighting, he courts and marries the daughter of the enemy. The two families are reconciled when they decide that the sensible solution is to divide the disputed acre between them.

Marriage is not always the way to stop a feud. The Wamplers and the Pratts in "Bury Your Dead"[82] have been at odds for years and the union of a Wampler son and a Pratt daughter has no positive effect on the inter-family war. The Wamplers disown their son when he goes to live with his wife's family and agree they would prefer to see him dead and in his coffin. Fortunately, there is a lull in the fighting due to a balance in victims on both sides. The Wampler head assesses the situation: "Now, we stand even—eight Pratts honorably kilt by Wampler guns; eight Wamplers bushwhacked in the foulest way by Pratts' clubs, rocks and guns. If we didn't stand even, there wouldn't be any peace." But the truce is shortlived. The Wampler turncoat dies unexpectedly and his wife's family brings the body back home in the dark and deposits it on the porch. The Wamplers sneak the body back to his adopted family, refusing to allow a traitor to sleep in their cemetery plot. The Pratts return the body, and the bizarre exchange goes on—despite the hot weather and the unembalmed state of the body. The battle lines are again drawn and open combat is about to erupt when the families agree to share the body. A grave is dug at the property line between the two families and the dead man's feet are placed on the Wampler side and his head on the Pratt side. The insane feud, however, is not over, as the Wampler narrator notes in conclusion: "Not a Wampler spoke to a Pratt nor a Pratt spoke to a Wampler at any time durin' the funeral nor as we gathered our guns and parted at the gap."

The mortality rate among feuding families is high, but some members manage to survive till old age. In "Land of Our Enemies"[83] the Powderjay family gathers secretly to bury Grandfather Powderjay, who has been foully murdered by the family enemies. The Powderjay kin arrive in the night and steal through the dark to the death cabin, which has quilts hung over the windows to keep the murderers from guessing the success of their mission. At two o'clock in the morning the body is taken quietly to its resting place. As the coffin is being lowered into the dark grave, word is passed joyously among the mourners that the old man's murderers have paid for their crime.

In "Competition at Slush Creek"[84] the feuding is none the less deadly for being a competition between businessmen. Two undertakers in Blakesburg are rivals in the death business. Each one vies with the other in being the first to reach the body of the recently departed. One day both men rush their hearses to an outlaw's cabin outside town to claim the body—or bodies—once an impending shoot-out between the sheriff and a fugitive is over. But the early undertaker fails to get the body because the dead outlaw's father angrily asserts his family's rights to take care of its own dead. Before they leave for town, the empty-handed—and nervous—morticians pull the curtains of their hearse to pretend they have a body. As they pass their tardy competitor, they tell him they had to leave two bodies behind. What they don't tell their unsuspecting rival is that the dead man's father is in a killing mood. Stuart fails to tell us whether Blakesburg has to make do now with only one undertaking establishment.

Bloodless feuding is not uncommon within the same family. At least no human blood flows in "South America and Tiger Tom,"[85] the story of a divided house. Narrated by a young boy who goes to live with his aging grandmother and grandfather, the plot concerns two old people who have never agreed on anything important. She is a Democrat and a Methodist. He is a Republican and a Baptist. In the store they operate he refuses to wait on Democrats and Methodists and she refuses to wait on Baptists and Republicans. Their twelve children are evenly divided between the two denominations and the two political parties. Now, in their twilight years, they have a new area of friction. She has a cat named Tiger Tom and he has a parrot named South America. Battle lines are drawn and the anxious young narrator anticipates a marital crisis should either animal harm the other. Luckily, the feuding pets resolve their conflict without their owner's bloodshed when the parrot swoops down one day upon the cat (who has been lying in wait for him), lifts him high into the air, then drops him to the ground: "The last anybody ever saw of old Tiger Tom was a small wisp of dust that rose up in the first bend of the Three Prong Valley Road." The pets reconcile their differences in separation, but the young narrator does not indicate how it affected the old people's strained relationship. One suspects their intra-family feud followed them to the grave.

Young people can sometimes overcome their families' animosities—and without having to sacrifice their own lives in Romeo-Juliet fashion. Rather, Stuart has one story in which such a resolution is shown to be possible. In "The Old Law Wasn't Strong Enough"[86] a boy falls in love with a daughter of the enemy and foils his family's plot to burn their house down, with all them inside. He substitutes water in the kerosene can and thus saves his future in-laws from fiery death—at least temporarily. The boy's grandfather believes the Old Testament to be too lenient in its pronouncements on revenge. He complains: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth! I believe in the old Law, only it wasn't made strong enough!" Ironically, the old man is especially kind to animals. Just as he is ready to give the signal to ignite the "kerosene" and burn up a house full of humans, he worries about possible dog victims: "I'd hate to hurt one of old Okie's hounds." Well, a man who loves dogs can't be all bad. If he can only transfer his compassion from his enemies' dogs to his enemies, perhaps the two families can live together as peacefully as the mixed couple intends to. Stuart's feuding families could learn a lot from animals.

THE GOOD EARTH

The humorous actions of man are played against the background of the ever fresh and vital land and its greenery. The earth that boasts of its eternal youth and goodness in Emerson's poem, "Hamatreya," and indicts man for his vanity is the same earth that contrasts with man in Stuart's books. In the Transcendentalist's poem the earth asks sarcastically of the whereabouts of the men who once presumed to own her and answers that they sleep within her. Only the earth is ultimately triumphant:

> Earth laughs in flowers, to see her boastful boys
> Earth-proud, proud of the earth which is not theirs;
> Who steer the plough, but cannot steer their feet
> Clear of the grave.

Earth—fought over, abused, gutted, ravaged, denuded—always has the last laugh, for it keeps being reborn to green youth, aided by man's remains that rest in her belly.

Stuart acquired much of his love and understanding of the land from his father, who realized man's absolute dependence upon it. Mick Stuart knew the interdependence of plants and animals, and his son's stories take this as a basic theme. Even the snakes have an all-important place in the scheme of nature, Mick taught Jesse, and they should not be wantonly killed. Several of the writer's poems and stories and one children's book are sympathetic portrayals of snakes. Once, Jesse recalls, his father told him that the corn blades talk to each other, and the eager child dropped to his knees to look for a corn mouth.

Jesse worked with his family in the fields and served for a while as a farm laborer. But whether in the fields, in the woods or along the streams—alone or with his father—Jesse absorbed the love and lore of the land which was later to assume so significant a place in his poetry and fiction. Once for a school project he plowed a single hill row that wound for twenty-three and one-half miles.[87] In "Wild Plums"[88] a high school principal plays hookey from school along with his students on an alluringly beautiful day in April. The principal in *Mr. Gallion's School* retreats Wordsworth-like to the land when the problems of school administration exhaust him—and he is restored. After Stuart's near fatal heart attack in 1954, he returned to his beloved W-Hollow to recover. The book he wrote about the year of his recuperation, *The Year of My Rebirth,* is not only a spiritual journal; it demonstrates Stuart's intensified awareness and love of nature. The book is a hymn of praise to his valley and to the Creator and Sustainer of it. Many of Stuart's poems extoll the beauties of rural Kentucky. The free verse title poem of *Kentucky Is My Land* is a tribute to his home state as the "core of America," which is neither "southern, northern, eastern or western."[89] His dislike for urban life is seen in "The Cities," in which he writes: "I saw the cities and I learned too well/ Each one can be a little piece of hell." The poem ends on this note:

> I said: To hell with all the paper money,
>
> [90]

Stuart's works point out that a man must be in right relationship with the land before he can relate rightly to his fellow human beings. Shortly before his death, the lazy Grandpa Tussie of *Taps for Private Tussie,* who has been living on governments handouts and his "dead" son's army insurance, experiences a kind of moral regeneration when he acquires the ability to love the land. All of Stuart's sympathetic characters are nature lovers. Deutsia Huntoon, the Melungeon heroine of *Daughter of the Legend,* could easily write a handbook for the Sierra Club. Her lover absorbs her landlore and is fascinated by her almost mystical relationship to nature: "My little Deutsia knows every flower that blooms and she knows where they grow. She knows every little stream on this mountain and she knows every kind of tree, vine and briar. She knows the birds and where they build. And she knows how to find a bee tree!" (p. 54)

The ability to find a bee tree is an important talent. So is turtle hunting. Honey and turtle meat have brightened many a hill table. Old Op is a genius at finding and probing for turtles with his bare hands. In "Turtle Hunt"[91] Op displays his turtle lore. He knows that turtle steak is a delicious combination of tastes: squirrel, pheasant, quail, rabbit, possum, coon and chicken hawk. A city visitor who accompanies him on a turtle hunt asks if a certain specimen is "mock turtle." Op replies that he has only heard of the hard-shell and soft-shell types. Mock turtle, indeed! Op would probably be repulsed by the insipid taste. Anyway, natural turtles are more practical and accessible: "When I want turtle meat I go ketch me a mess of turtles. A body has to eat. And up here if a body don't go after his grub, he won't eat."

Although he has too often abused his environment, the hill man who is aware of his full dependence on the land is an instinctive conservationist. Stuart learned this truth from his father, who practiced conservation long before it became a national cause. But sometimes "progress" from the outside world intrudes to disrupt the local ecology and life-style. In the riotously comic "Mad Davids and a Mechanical

Goliath"[92] two road workers fear their own obsolescence when they see a bulldozer doing their work with deadly efficiency. A swarm of bees feels likewise threatened and attacks the monster and its driver, forcing a halt to work on a new creek channel. The bees know their enemies and direct all their stings at the strangers, sparing the two laborers.

Man knows that he can never possess the land permanently, but he continues to try to assert his dominion over it during his lifetime. And land feuds are common among Stuart's people. A drinking trespasser in "Coming Down the Mountain"[93] is cured of both his vices by a land-owning neighbor's stratagem. When the drunkard's sons ask the landowner for the use of a mule to carry their unconscious father home, the sly farmer places a handful of cockleburrs under the saddle. The boys tie their father onto the saddle so he won't fall off, and immediately the mule starts bucking and trying to walk on his hind feet. The frightening antics of the tortured mule quickly sober the man, and when he finally arrives at home and is untied from the saddle, he promises never to drink or trespass again. In "Testimony of Trees"[94] a farmer builds a barn on land a neighbor says he owns. The barn builder, however, proves his ownership when he points to a scar made on a tree some seventy years before when the land line was run.

Thousands of Eastern Kentuckians share Stuart's attitudes toward the city as expressed in "The Cities," cited earlier. They have found the lure of the city to be but a pipe dream. When they leave the land, they often become disenchanted with their new urban homes and long to return to the soil. One of Stuart's farm families discovers their near mistake just in time. A rural couple in "This Farm for Sale"[95] decide they are tired of living in mud and without the modern city conveniences and agree to sell their farm and move into town. They engage a real estate agent who tours the farm and writes a glowing description of it for an ad in the local paper. The couple read the ad, become impressed with what they already have and renege on their promise to sell.

One of Stuart's most successful, suspenseful and consistently comic novels is *The Good Spirit of Laurel Ridge*. Set near the town of Honeywell, the plot concerns an Old Man of the Woods who has lived alone since his wife died twenty years before. That is, he has lived alone except for the "good sperets" that share the ridge with him. Then his daughter Lutie arrives from Dayton and nurses him after he has an eye operation that restores partial vision in one eye. Op and his daughter begin to see a "ghost," who, Op thinks, is the good spirit of a man dead some thirty years. The good spirit is revealed in the end to be an AWOL soldier who has followed Lutie to the ridge after he thought he had killed a man who had been fresh with her. Actually the man did not die and the soldier will probably receive only six months in the stockade.

The main interest of the novel, however, is not in the plot outlined above. It is in Op, one of Stuart's most completely realized and sympathetic characters. He is a comic masterpiece—a cantankerous, independent old cuss, but loving and lovable. More importantly, he has lived intimately with the land for over fifty years. Although he doesn't hold deeds to the land he lives on and hunts and fishes, he is more truly the "owner" than those who do. He lives on the Ridge, he says, because he "never did trust a valley." His cabin is a natural home for a man of nature with its walls hung with horse hairs that produce music when the wind blows. He has a son, Jack, who returns unexpectedly one day from Iowa with a butterfly net in his hand. Jack is in his mid-twenties but has the mind of a child. But he is as much a natural man as his father. He catches and plays with butterflies but never kills them or any other animal. Jack expresses only the humane and beautiful side of nature. Op is as much a lover of nature as his son, but his view is more balanced, for he knows that nature can be harsh and destructive.

The Ridge becomes a bit crowded when Ludie's cousins, the Alfred Pruitts, also arrive from Dayton. Pruitt comes seeking a refuge from the terrors of the outside world, but he is no more suited to the Ridge than he is to Dayton—in fact, not as much so. Op tries unsuccessfully to tutor the city man in the lore of the land. Pruitt, in turn, complains about the lack of conveniences and ridicules Op's superstitions and his tall tales of snakes and spirits. Once, however, Op raises a "knockin' speret" to convince the skeptical Pruitt of the truth of the spirit world. Sure enough, there is oral evidence of a spirit's presence. The reader is left to decide whether the spirit is Red Jacket, a long dead Indian chief—or a woodpecker. (I believe in Red Jacket.) Throughout the novel Op is depicted as completely at home in the woods and Pruitt as too soft and scared to survive on the land—or probably anywhere. Nevertheless, Pruitt and his wife decide they prefer to risk the dangers of a nuclear holocaust and return to the city. At least back in Dayton they won't have to live in Op's smokehouse.

Also contrasting with Op are the trashy Hammertights. The Hammertight son, Hoot, is a ridiculous-looking man who tries to court Lutie with his attentions and his off-key guitar playing and singing. The Hammertights live on the land but not off the land. Mrs. Hammertight, whom Hoot calls "Mommie" (he calls his father "Poppie"), does piddling housework for town people and cleans out their refrigerators when they are gone. Op prefers that Lutie be courted by a ghost rather than risk a liaison with the Hammertights.

In the final analysis, the novel is a salute to a man who lives in intimate and interdependent association with the land he loves. Although the Pruitts never know it, Laurel Ridge is indeed a refuge, an enchanted place where music plays for those who have ears to hear, where beauty abounds for those who have eyes to see. It is truly a place of good spirits. And Op is their friend and guardian. Finally, after the evil (projected chiefly by the Hammertights) that has briefly endangered the Ridge has been exorcised, the place is left to Op, his spirits, and his "simple-minded" son, who comes and goes as naturally and as benevolently as the seasons.

Two extreme responses to the land are represented in *Trees of Heaven*—that of a hard-working farmer whose aim in life is to "own" land and that of a family of shiftless, unprogressive, improvident squatters. For almost seventy years Anse Bushman has enslaved himself to his motto of "gettin ahead." He has almost killed his wife with hard work. His rough life has driven off all his children except for one last son, whom he is trying to indoctrinate with his view of life. The Boliver

Tussies, on the other hand, appear to him to be dirty, lazy people who live no better than hogs. Indeed, on the surface, Boliver is the stereotype of the trashy poor white.[96] He is apparently the Jeeter Lester of the Kentucky hills. Flies swarm over him as he lies on his front porch with his bare feet raised or hanging over the edge. He loves his liquor. About all he is successful in raising is a crop of children. The Tussies are content to live off the land, leaving it pretty much the way it is. Anse wants to control it. He buys land and asserts his power over it by putting it under cultivation. He thinks he possesses it when he puts his mark on the land. Ignoring the effect his actions have on the wild animals and plants and the squatters, he burns his acres and clears them for plowing.

When Anse buys the land on which the Tussies are living, he agrees to rent them fifty acres. But first he forces Boliver to sign an involved contract, a harsh document for the freedom-loving man. The paper prohibits frolics, fishing during the crop season, the making of moonshine, revival attendance more than twice a week, having a baby each year or any other kind of "immoral" conduct on the premises. For a while it seems that Anse has won the Tussies over to his way of life. Then one day he sees two apparently loose women on their way to Boliver's house and decides to pay a visit. He later reports the scene to his wife: "Boliver was over there on the porch drunk with his feet hangin over. He was hollerin that he was fallin. All the children, Crissie [the squatter's wife] and the two strange wimmen I saw this mornin was there. . . . I jest got me a bresh and I whopped Boliver until he got up and staggered in the house." (p. 255) In addition, Mrs. Tussie is again pregnant. Once he is sober, however, Boliver reasserts his old self: "You whopped me with a club when I was drunk. You'll never whop me agin unless I'm drunk. By God, I'll git drunk when I git damned good and ready. I'm gittin tired of all this petticoat gover-mint you got us under. Tryin to tell me how many babies my wife is to have. Trying to tell me when to pray and where to pray; when to go to church; when to dance and when not to dance." (p. 269) When Anse checks the Tussie account—which he has guaranteed—at a local store, he discovers that they have been buying luxuries and ingredients for making moonshine. These irresponsible actions are, of course, too much for Anse and he takes the squatters to court to evict them. The suit is successful and Boliver and his family are forced off the land. Anse, however, has yet his lesson to learn. One day he is cutting down a chestnut tree and the tops breaks off, hitting him on the head. While he is in a delirium, he has a vision set in Plum Grove Church, where a preacher warns him that a man could own land and have great wealth and still be doomed to eternal fire and brimstone. This is not his first warning. Earlier his longsuffering wife had asked him: "What is the worth of this big farm when a man has lost his soul?" (p. 302) At last, Anse repents his treatment of the Tussies and invites them back to the land. Anse's moral growth is evident in his confession to Tarvin, his son: "Boliver hast his faults but he belongs to the dirt same as I belong to the dirt and same as you belong to the dirt—same as the grass,weeds, corn, cane and terbacker belong to the dirt. And Boliver belongs to this dirt. He belongs to these rough slopes—these rocks and these deep hollers."

(p. 333)

Eighteen-year-old Tarvin has already learned what it has taken his father some seventy years to know. And a Tussie has been his tutor. For some time he has been secretly courting Subrinea Tussie, who becomes pregnant by him. They now consider themselves married by the laws of God. Subrinea represents the best aspects of squatter living. She shows him the squatter graveyard surrounded by the wilderness and covered by the trees of heaven, and he returns there alone to muse: "They didn't waste their lives away buyin land and more land and working like brutes to pay fer land like Pa has. They didn't work their wives like Pa has worked Ma. They took life easier and I don't know but what it was better. . . . They lived while they lived." (p. 191)

For a long time his mother has questioned Anse's concept of the good life. Her hard life and her admonitions to Tarvin have helped to counteract Anse's influence. At a molasses-making she lectures him: "If you ever marry, Tarvin . . . don't you ever let your wife work like I haf to work. I've had to work like this and carry you youngins. I've worked like this up to a week before one of you was born. I've throwed my hoe down in the cornfield and went to the house to have my baby. Young man, you wasn't born in the house. You was born in the cornfield. I couldn't git to the house in time." (p. 56) Again, she warns Tarvin: "Your Pa don't know nothin but to take care of land and breed livestock, save money, raise big crops and buy more land. He takes better keer of his land and his livestock than he ever did his children. He made it so hard on his children that they left home soon as they got big enough to git away." (p. 139) Finally, with Subrinea under the trees of heaven at the Tussie burying grounds, he decides: "I liked the way the squatters lived. They had a good time while they lived. They didn't work themselves to death. They didn't try to hog all the land; yet they lived. They were a happy lot." (p. 232)

The truth that is the novel's theme is that a man must learn to live joyously in concert with the land. And insofar as the novel exposes man's pretensions, it is humorous. Humor operates in that area between what man is and what he aspires to be. Owning land, possessing it so that he can survive in and through it, is a futile and ludicrous attempt to deny his own mortality. Man tries foolishly to erect a monument of land to himself, vainly disregarding the fact that his dust will be indistinguishable from the dust of other dead things. The land laws of primogeniture and entail are fossils of man's efforts at this kind of immortality. Despite their moral failings, the squatters "own" the land the only possible way: they live off it and love it. They are the natural cousins of Old Op of *The Good Spirit of Laurel Ridge*. All men are in truth squatters on the earth. The Tarvin-Subrinea coupling will hopefully blend the best of both the Bushman and Tussie views of the land. The name "Bushman" suggests that man is also a creature of nature. The Tarvin-Subrinea union should issue in responsible, moral participants in the natural world.

Closely aligned to Stuart's attitude toward the land is his writing about animals. Implicit in his books is the assumption that the man who accepts his role in the natural world will relate rightly to wild and domestic animals. When the Kentuckian was teaching at the American University in Cairo in 1960-61, one day he passed a group of boys beating a horse that had fallen in the road. Reacting quickly and cleverly to the shocking scene, Stuart asked his guide to tell the boys that he was an American horse doctor and that he prescribed a thirty-minute rest for the animal. He additionally prescribed a more leisurely pace for the horse and better feeding.[97] Such compassion for a brute animal is evidence of years of close relationship with creatures that have served man so well.

Stuart's hill world is a personalized one in which animals have distinct personalities. The wild animals are respected for their gifts (the foxes in *Mongrel Mettle* have many traits that man would benefit from emulating), and domestic animals are often considered members of the family. A cow may be called Gypsy, a dog Raggs or Scout, or a mule Dick or Dinah. In one story a captured wild cat is named Sweetgum after the tree in which he was found. In addition to the prominent place that animals fill in his poetry and fiction, Stuart has written several essay-tributes to them. One of his most moving autobiographical sketches is "Sir Birchfield,"[98] the story of a cocker the Stuarts owned for many years. He has also sketched spiders and whippoorwills in essays.

Stuart's characters become very attached to their animals and mourn their loss—and sometimes try to prevent it—to death or the auction market. "Soddy"[99] is an account of how a young boy saves his pet calf from being sold for veal by kidnapping him until he could dig enough ginseng to buy him from his father. "Old Lollipop"[100] is the loving portrait of a family cow, who, at the ancient age (for a cow) of twenty-seven gives birth to a calf. Old Boss, a beloved pet bull, narrowly escapes the slaughter house in "To Market, To Market."[101] The owner has taught the bull the feat of walking on his hind legs, but when he kills a neighbor's bull and begins knocking down fences, his master sadly decides he must sell him. He failed, however, to consult the bull; and after he is sold at the auction, the bull rampages around the bidding area, scattering buyers and spectators. The new owner gladly sells him at a loss, and Old Boss settles down, meekly following his old owner back to the truck to go home.

Next to his dogs, the hill man probably loves his mules best. "Old Dick"[102] is the winsome story of a mule owned by Mick Powderjay. Old Dick has a fondness for kicking his master, but Mick makes elaborate, self-accusing excuses for the mule's behavior. When the mule dies of old age, Mick is broken-hearted and buries him in his favorite spot at the edge of a pine grove. Mules are sometimes troublesome, but like Mick their owners usually learn to tolerate their eccentricities. "Uncle Jeff Had a Way"[103] records the trouble Mick Powderjay has retrieving Dick and Dinah when they run away. For three days Mick and his sons fruitlessly pursue the mules. Apparently the animals look upon the chase as a game. In desperation, Mick tries Uncle Jeff's advice to entice them home with a white pony. It works. Perhaps no character in fiction is more enamoured of mules than the protagonist of "Red Mule and the Changing World."[104] Nicknamed Red Mule because of his preference for the animals, the man literally lives with his mules—all thirty-five of them. To protect them from the glue or fertilizer factory, Red Mule uses his money earned from plowing (mules, of course) to buy and feed his rapidly growing herd. He is, as he says, "married to my mules." Once he proves the superiority of mules over machinery by using his namesakes to pull a tractor out of the mud. Anyway, it is easier to caress a mule than a tractor.

But dogs hold the number one spot in the hill man's heart. Almost all of Stuart's men and boys—and all the good ones—are intimately shackled to from one to dozens of dogs. In "The Rightful Owner"[105] a feud is almost started over the ownership of a stray dog. The dog is finally allowed to choose his rightful owner and thus is human bloodletting averted. Two boys, at first glance, mistreat an old dog in "King of the Hills"[106] when they feed him a mixture of milk and moonshine. However, Black Boy is almost nineteen, and they want to rejuvenate him for one last glorious hunt. They succeed, and the dog dies happily on his nineteenth birthday.

Other animals also figure prominently in Stuart's works, including squirrels, pigs, snakes, frogs and one minnow. In "Another Home for the Squirrels"[107] a boy's grandfather brings home several orphaned baby squirrels. The boy and his mother nurse them to maturity. They find, however, that the wild animals are not easily domesticated. They bite, they gnaw holes in the roof, they cut the lining from Grandpa's coat and they eat Pa's seed corn. Too compassionate to kill them, the boy takes them out to a beech grove where they can live with their wild cousins. The father agrees that wild animals deserve to live in the wilds because "They'll be much happier there." Tragedy is again avoided in "The Blue Tick Pig"[108] when a boy's pet pig—discovered to be sucking cows—is sold to a carnival and becomes a side-show attraction. "The Old Are Valiant"[109] relates the story of a death struggle between a snake and a dog. The two animals fight inconclusively until they are both exhausted. When a boy who has been watching the contest starts to kill the snake, his father prevents him, explaining that the snake has earned his right to live.

While recovering from his heart attack, Stuart writes in *Year of My Rebirth,* he and his daughter Jane witnessed an unequal encounter between a snake and a frog. The snake soon swallows the frog; whereupon Stuart catches the snake, makes an incision with his pocketknife and pulls the expiring frog through. They pour water over the Jonah-like creature and he slowly revives. Then they doctor the snake with turpentine and tape up the cut. Both animals—or their descendants—should be alive and well today somewhere in the grass and streams of W-Hollow. (pp. 168-173) One entry in *Year of My Rebirth* opens with this startling, Thoreau-like statement: "I met a minnow today who loved life." Indeed he did. Stuart records that he had seen a minnow in a small puddle of water fight valiantly for his life against a snake that would swallow him. And the minnow wins! In the natural world survival of the fittest is the law of life. In W-Hollow a minnow can be extremely fit. (pp. 225-230) All the denizens of the animal world are beautiful to Stuart and have a divinely appointed place in it. It is an evil man who would disturb the delicate balance of nature.

Now, an appreciation of the law of ecology surely does not proscribe horse trading. The hill man, like the earlier frontiersman, delights in his prowess in besting his neighbor in an exchange of animals. In "The Chase of the Skittish Heifer"[110] a man outwits a rival trader. For days the men have been trying to capture a wild heifer, and—at the end of his rope—the owner sells her for seventy dollars less than she is worth. The triumphant buyer brags: "Old Jake has always beat me on trading. Once he sold me a mule with the distemper for seventy-five. Mule wasn't worth ten to me. I've made it back in this trade." The new owner knows that she is not really wild. He knows that all he has to do to tame her is to leave her in the pasture till winter. Then she will get hungry enough to come up and lick salt out of his hand.

Unfortunately, someone always loses in a hard trade. In "Rich Men"[111] a proud man boasts that he is the best trader in those parts. Failing to heed his wife's warning that "pride comes before a great fall," he meets a disreputable-looking stranger and agrees flippantly to sell him all his cattle at a low price. He assumes, naturally, that the bum hardly has the price of a glass of milk. The stranger's appearance belies his pocketbook, and he holds the poor farmer to the deal. "Hot-Collared Mule"[112] is another story of an unfortunate trade. The boy-narrator says that his father is constantly bragging about his skill in mule-trading. That is, until he swaps with another trader and discovers too late that he has made a bad bargain. On the way to town to deliver a load of melons, the mule gets hot, begins to buck and spills the load. The father and son pour ten buckets of water over the hot-collared mule to cool him off—as the laughing spectators gather to enjoy the trader's humiliation as well as the broken melons scattered along the road.

The hunting and killing of wild animals is a sticky problem for Stuart. Although he no longer hunts, he realizes the necessity of hunting to supplement the diet of hill families. He is, however, unalterably opposed to the wanton slaughter of animals for sport. "Thanksgiving Hunter"[113] is an eloquent expression of opposition to the sport of dove hunting. And "Our Wiff and Daniel Boone"[114] is a bitter indictment of a man who kills wild animals for thrills. The sportsman boasts that in one year he killed 513 squirrels. Believing that he is Daniel Boone reincarnated, he goes to the Michigan North Woods for a bigger challenge. There he is mistaken for a deer and shot. He thus learns what it is like to be stalked game, and he vows never again to kill wild animals. Another man who learns the cruelty of sport hunting is the title character of "The War and Cousin Lum."[115] Shan Powderjay tells about his city cousin who used to delight in coming to the hills to kill rabbits. Then Cousin Lum serves in World War I and returns with one eye and one foot missing—and a changed attitude toward hunting. He resolves never to kill anything again. Wiff and Lum perhaps reacted to an extreme. But they have learned that they, like the animals they have preyed upon, are dependent upon the land and its balance of life. When the balance is upset by sport hunting or any kind of injudicious exploitation of the land and its creatures, everyone suffers. Stuart's works are a powerful plea for sound conservation.

In Stuart's books the earth is the earth is the earth. He occasionally uses nature for symbols, but he prefers to let a river be a river and a tree a tree. His meanings are generally as direct and as basic as the earth itself. And the earth is rather profound. Symbol-hunting pedants could conclude that "grass" in Stuart's fiction and poetry is as much a symbol of life or immortality—or whatever—as it is in Whitman's poetry. Truly it is. But Stuart's grass is first and foremost grass. After all, symbolic grass does not grow in the ground of W-Hollow and green in the spring.

Or if Stuart uses grass as a reminder of the immortality of the land, he typically expresses it directly. Most of his poetry is, in fact, a paean to the joy of life in nature. Because the earth is not subject to the willful improprieties of man, there is little humor in his nature poems. By contrast to the beauty and dignity of nature, however, man is laughable. The earth is a constant reminder to man that he is ephemeral. Stuart's poetry is a call to vitality, robustness and good times now in the strength of shortlived life and youth. Since one cannot escape the end of his life, he should submit himself to the way things are. Submission to the natural pattern is the theme of a sonnet, "John," in which the title character speaks:

> Come, Love, let us resign ourselves to patterns
>
> [116]

"Red Holbrook Speaks to His Mountains" is a miniature testament of acceptance: "You'll have the last laugh on us mortals here/ With your bare rocky lips among the skies." The concluding lines contrast the permanence and grandeur of nature with man and allude to the primary source of man's humor:

> Our human failings you do not despise . . .
>
> .[117]

Awareness of his own mortality does not prevent Stuart from longing for a special kind of hereafter—one very much like W-Hollow, one imagines. *Plowshare in Heaven* contains this request: "Surely, for a hill Kentuckian God would let us have our Heaven here in Kentucky!" (p. 272) The hills must have meant something to a man who can make that plea—even in jest.

COMING OF AGE IN THE HILLS

A writer often uses the materials of his life as the subject matter of his fiction, and the line between invention and autobiography is sometimes an indistinct one. Jesse Stuart, who has lived most of his life in W-Hollow, Greenup County, Kentucky, and who has purposefully written about his experiences, is one of the most autobiographical of American authors. One may, in fact, read the Jesse Stuart canon as personal accounts of his own growing up process. He frequently has two versions of the same story—one "fictional" and the other autobiographical. The Powderjay family of his fiction is a thinly disguised rendering of the Stuart family of his youth. Shan, Stuart's familiar narrator, is Jesse. Finn is Jesse's brother James, and Mick and Sall Powderjay have the same first names as his own father and mother.

Most of Stuart's admittedly autobiographical work chronicling his maturation as a man deals with his relations with his father and with his formal education in Kentucky and Tennessee. *To Teach, To Love* includes many humorous experiences that helped to mature him—both inside and outside the classroom. Although his father was the dominant extramural influence on his life, his mother played no small role. Stuart recalls, for example, when he was a pupil at Plum Grove School and had to walk by "Grandma" Collins' apple orchard every day. The temptation was too much for the little boy. His mother discovers that he has been stealing the old lady's fruit and berates him for such an evil deed. He defends himself by saying that the apples he took were on the ground and, anyway, the wild animals were eating them: "Why ain't I as good as a fox, possum, polecat, rabbit, or crow?" His mother reminds him of the difference between animals and humans. "They don't know any better, but you do know better." She makes him return the stolen apples to the owner. (pp. 27-30)

Every experience was an education for Stuart. At least, the ones he remembers so vividly and writes about must have been. When he was fifteen, he spent several weeks at military camp at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. One day at bayonet practice, he writes in *To Teach, To Love,* a captain lectures him in military discipline. The officer says that the young man from the hills should have enough "sand in your craw" to cut off the captain's own arm if he told him to. Stuart says "Sir stick it out" and finds himself doing fatigue duty guarded by two men with rifles and live ammunition. Evidently the captain's lecture had not called for an oral response. (p. 48)

His autobiographical writings on education, discussed below, are essentially accounts of his maturation. One example will suffice here. While he was a student at Lincoln Memorial University, he records in *To Teach, To Love,* he had a professor who told him one day that his grade for a course was on the border between an *A* and a *B*. The professor said he would give him an *A*— if Stuart would buy him a 25¢ cigar. The student opportunist, sensing the possibility of doing even better, suggested that two 25¢ cigars might be worth "a standing-up A without any trimmings." The professor agreed, Stuart borrowed 50¢ from his roommate, bought the cigars and got his straight *A*. The young scholar was learning fast how to harvest in the groves of academe. (pp. 82-83)

In his fiction and in his autobiographical works relations with the opposite sex is a common subject. Like all boys, Stuart and his boy-narrators experience traumas in learning about that three-letter word. In *God's Oddling* the young Stuart asks his mother where he came from. She replies that he came from behind a stump on the hill. Stuart immediately starts searching for babies behind stumps. He finds several hens' nests, but no babies. When he goes to his mother for an explanation, she says that only doctors know where the baby-stumps are located. (p. 22)

Shan Powderjay one day unknowingly witnesses the baby-making process. In "Dawn of Remembered Spring"[118] he is out killing snakes to avenge a friend who has been bitten by a water moccasin. He collects fifty-three victims and then spies two copperheads in an unfamiliar pose: "They were wrapped around each other. Their lidless eyes looked into each other's eyes. Their hard lips touched each other's lips. They did not move. They did not pay any attention to me. They looked at one another." Shan assumes that they are fighting, but the adults who gather to watch just smile knowingly.

The pains of young love is the theme of "The Slipover Sweater."[119] Shan (here his surname is Stringer) borrows money to buy a sweater to give to a girl with whom he is infatuated. The affair is painfully brief and he goes back to his old girlfriend. "He's Not Our People"[120] focuses on the rivalry between an elegant town dandy and a country boy for the hand of a country lass. The rural lad eliminates his competition when he takes him fox hunting and contrives to have him shot at mysteriously. With no competition, the winner is still bashful at courting: "I don't mind fightin a man . . . but talkin to a woman and tellin 'er you love 'er is hard to do."

Shan's girl friend in "As Ye Sow, So Shall Ye Reap"[121] is indirectly responsible for the boy's instructive encounter with the adult world. Shan and his cousin decide to get even with the girl's father because Shan feels the man mistreats him. They sow grass seeds in his strawberry patch. Their exposure brings them to their knees, weeding the patch.

Another courting story is "Wolf Boy from Walnut Ridge."[122] When some transient outlanders are driving through and have an accident, their dog escapes. The native community organizes to retrieve him, but the hunt becomes a contest between two boys—who are vying for the attention of the same girl. The "wolf boy" narrator brags that he has such a highly developed nose that he can distinguish a dog scent from other smells. Everyone laughs at his alleged talent. While the search party is canvassing the holes in a rock cliff, the nose-boy stoops down, sniffs and announces that the hole in question contains a ground hog or possum or polecat. Then he stops at a hole and proclaims that it is the one that contains the dog. Yes, it does. He fails to divulge to his admiring audience the secret of his dog-finding success. Actually, he has no better nose than anyone else—including his wilted rival. He merely reads the tracks at the hole entrances. But the girl is impressed.

Religion is a point of contention between a courting couple in "Love in the Spring."[123] A Methodist boy attends a foot-washing ceremony at the Slab Baptist Church, where he falls in love (or so he thinks) with a girl who is getting her feet washed. The girl's likeminded boyfriend accosts him: "Go on about your business . . . and leave us Baptists alone. This ain't no side show. We are here worshiping the Lord." But the smitten infidel is not so easily dissuaded. During a protracted meeting at the Baptist meetinghouse, he goes to the church and peers inside to glimpse his beloved—and hears the preacher's timely message: "The devil in sheep's clothing is out there. Methodists are snooping around." Opposition also rears its doctrinal head within his own family as his mother warns him against marrying an infidel Baptist, "one that has a religion that believes in drinking and playing poker and betting on rooster fights and spitting at cracks in the crib floor." (Since most old-time Baptists disapprove of all those acts of the devil, the Slabs must have been an unusual splinter group.) The mother concludes that "if you get burnt you got to set on the blister." When the woman threatens to disown him if he insists on this foolish, made-in-hell union, he leaves behind all he has held dear to go live (he hopes) with one he would like to hold dearer. Alas, the girl is not expecting him; and his sojourn in the enemy's tent is brief, being terminated by the girl's Baptist boyfriend who beats him up and down. After the battered Methodist returns to his senses, he returns to his mother's biscuits.

It is lucky that he didn't get to go as far as the boyfriend in "Kathleen Nippart." In this poem a girl reveals that her boyfriend will have to marry her to give her unborn child a father's name. Then she warns other girls: "Young girls had better watch or they will get/ Something in April that arrives in winter."[124] That something may not be Santa Claus.

An indispensable skill the young person must develop is how to get alone in an adult world. Stuart's maturing youngsters learn fast. Witness the young people in "Tradelast."[125] A tradelast is an exchange of "something good somebody said about you" in return for something good the teller wants. In this story Shan and his friends fabricate tradelasts for two lonely people so that they will be rewarded with permission to hunt and fish on the unmarried couple's lands. Never fear. No damage is done. On the contrary, the lies the boys tell the man and woman are verbal expressions of the two adults' secret desires. Nevertheless, the boys learn how to have their way in a world where the hunting and fishing rights are controlled by grown-ups.

Diplomacy is another talent a young person has to learn. The title of "Two Worlds"[126] accurately describes the dichotomized world in which Shan Powderday lives. The world of his family is divided into Democrat and Republican, Union and Rebel partisans and Methodist and Baptist. Diplomacy—his refusal to take sides openly—is for Shan a matter of survival. The boy had been a source of controversy at birth, with one side wanting him named Robert E. Lee Powderday and the other insisting on Ulysses S. Grant Powderday. The impasse was resolved when "Shan" was selected as his name. Diplomacy is represented in "The Wind Blew East"[127] by silence on the part of a country boy who moves into town to live with his persnickety aunt and uncle. The boy is forced into compliance with stringent regulations regarding how he is to reside (no one "lives" in that house) in their house. The cowed boy must revel secretly in his relatives' misery when polecats get into their "model" home, stinking it up and forcing the couple to flee till it is fumigated. After that, the boy is allowed to enter the premises with his shoes on.

A young person's developing attitudes toward law and authority is the theme of several of Stuart's stories, including "How We Applied American Democracy"[128] and "Saving the Bees."[129] In the first story two boys receive the tacit approval of their teacher in a course in Problems of American Democracy after they destroy three illegal distilleries. The professor had mentioned in class the reluctance of the local authorities to take any action against local moonshiners. The two boys constitute a vigilante committee to right what they consider a societal wrong. In the second story Shan Powderjay and three of his friends rebel against the adult world when they play Robin Hoods and rob the local farmers of their bees. The foursome plan to release from captivity all the bees in the Plum Grove community. Big Aaron, the sixteen-year-old captain of the robbers, is obviously motivated in part by the excitement, but also by humane impulses: "It is a shame to coop bees in boxes and sawed-off logs and make them work their lives away for a lazy bunch of people." The nocturnal burglaries begin, and the entire area is aroused. Even the preacher's stinging sermon is an indictment of the sneaking bee thieves. After several close escapes from farmers and their shotguns, the well-meaning outlaws are apprehended. They will be made to recapture all the bees they have freed. Thy learn, probably, that sometimes a bee in a box is worth two in the bush. Certainly they learn that when it comes to bees, the adults are in control.

Like the young Nick Adams in Hemingway's stories, Stuart's young people frequently have to come to terms with people who are different from themselves, and they have to understand the existence of violence in life. "The Moon Child from Wolfe Creek"[130] tells of a strange boy who was born when the moon was "tilted in the sky." The boy lives alone with his father in the backwoods, where they hunt and trap. He has the uncanny alibity to "put his nose down to a dirt hole and tell if there's anything in it." He is so terrified of the other children he is afraid to approach the schoolhouse. Gradually, the children realize that he is not really so strange after all and treat him kindly. He leaves his fears behind as he enters the school building.

Natural violence is the subject of the first short story Stuart ever wrote, "Nest Egg."[131] Originally a class theme written at Greenup High School when he was sixteen, this Shan Powderday story tells of a scrub rooster named Nest Egg who gets his owner into trouble. He kills all his competitors in staged cock fights. In mock-heroic terms, Shan describes the championship fights in which the cocky little rooster kills War Hawk, Hercules, Napoleon and Red Devil—all renowned warriors of the barnyard. The neighbors become increasingly jealous and angry when their hens are seduced away from home by the famous fighter. But nobody wins against fate forever—not even a heroic rooster—and a screech owl flies into the chicken roost when Nest Egg is sleeping and attacks him fatally from the rear. A boy must learn that even the valiant die once.

A story to match the gruesomeness of Hemingway's "Indian Camp" is "A Christmas Present for Uncle Bob."[132] Again, the narrator is Shan Powderday, who recalls the Yuletide present his grandfather once took to his brother Bob, an "old-fashioned country doctor." Shan accompanies the old man on the trip, unaware of what the guitar-shaped box next to them on the sled contains. To Uncle Bob's delight, it holds a corpse. The doctor has always kept on hand an embalmed cadaver that he can shoot full of bullets and then probe for. Of late, however, there has been a scarcity of probe-worthy corpses. It is understandable why Uncle Bob tells his thoughtful brother that this is the best Christmas present he has ever received. Shan assimilates the experience, concluding: "And since they were pleased, I was pleased . . . . " A touch of the grotesque a bit closer to home is found in "The Last Round Up,"[133] in which a boy is required to accompany his parents to dances where his father plays, both parents drink intemperately and they fight each other viciously. The son's job is to keep them from maiming or killing each other.

In *Hie to the Hunters* a city boy leaves home to live and learn in the hills. The novel is a *Bildungsroman* for Didway Hargis. When Did is being attacked on the street by a band of young ruffians, he is rescued by Jud Sparks, a country boy who chews tobacco and squirts the lethal juice into the eyes of his enemies. Did decides he wants to be more like Jud and goes to live with him and his family in the country. Life with the Sparks family in the Plum Grove hills is Did's cram course in growing up. The city greenhorn quickly—perhaps too quickly for verisimilitude—learns to adapt to the harsh survival struggle in the country. Jud teaches him to hunt, to saw and chop wood, to ride a mule, to set a trap line and to sleep with a hound dog on cold nights to keep warm. He once learns not to put his head too close to a hole that houses a polecat. While Did is living with Jud, a war is in progress between the fox hunters and the tobacco farmers. The farmers destroy the foxhounds that run through their tobacco plots and the hunters retaliate by burning the tobacco barns. Did learns to endure war. He also learns to fight the small army his father brings into the country to take him back into town. (The battle between the country people plus Did and the town men is a farce.) The educational process, however, is not all one-sided: Jud (or Sparkie, as he is nicknamed) learns something about books and such from Did. Eventually Did has learned enough and returns voluntarily to live with his family in town. The two boys agree to visit each other, for each still has something to teach the other.

For a hill boy, growing up means that he learns to assume the masculine or dominant role in the family. Some men are still boys in relating to their wives. "Henpecked"[134] is the story of a man whose masculine maturation occurs late in life. One day the man tells his daughter not to bother a turtle she is pursuing in a creek, and she replies that she will tell her mother on him. Suddenly the man decides that he has submitted to his wife's "petticoat government" long enough and that it is high time he asserted his manhood before his wife and children. This he does in classical dictatorial fashion. "I've been a turkey gobbler with his tail feathers pulled out," he says. He sprouts new tail feathers over night and becomes a man. Sometimes, however, the cultural mores that stipulate the male role can be disastrous. In "The Weakling,"[135] for example, a twenty-two year old man with a rheumatic heart tries to prove his manhood by going on a winter hunt in deep snow. He is almost frozen to death. But he has proved his point: "I might have been a little crazy to go hunting on a day like this but I was no weakling."

All seven of Stuart's books for children deal in maturation experiences. Three of them—*Andy Finds a Way, Red Mule* and *The Rightful Owner*—are extended versions of short stories. In *Andy Finds a Way* a young boy learns that he can earn enough money from digging and selling ginseng to buy a pet calf from his father and save him from being vealed.[136] Scrappie Lykins learns in *Red Mule* to appreciate the moral sincerity of an odd man whose monomania is to buy mules to save them from slaughter.[137] In *The Rightful Owner* Mike Richard experiences the joy of finding, training and loving a stray dog—and the necessity of giving him up when his rightful owner appears.[138]

A Penny's Worth of Character is the moral tale of Shan Shelton whose mother sends him to the store to buy groceries. As usual, she allows him to take used paper bags which the kind storekeeper will exchange for candy. Shan hides one defective bag in the pile, but his mother makes him admit his dishonesty by taking the merchant a good one. The story is an Abe Lincoln parable of moral uprightness.[139]

In *The Beatinest Boy* a boy named David learns compassion for wild animals. Orphaned and living with his grandmother on a mountain top, one year he plans to catch possums and kill them for their hides. With his hide-money he will buy a fine Christmas present for his dear old granny. When he becomes aware of how much the little animals love life, he releases them and gives his grandmother napkins and a tablecloth made from feed sacks.[140]

Sunny Logan is a pupil at Plum Grove School. Like his parents, he has never been out of his native valley. In *A Ride with Huey the Engineer* he takes an exciting Saturday ride on a train. His adventures as guest of the train's engineer make him the envy of everyone, including his parents.[141]

One of Stuart's most delightful stories is *Old Ben*. Its subject is snakes. One day Shan finds a friendly six-foot black snake in a clover field and takes him home. Fearful that his father will kill the snake, he hides him in the corn crib. There the snake is discovered by Old Blackie, their hunting dog. Shan pleads that the family will love the snake as much as he does—once they get to know him. They do. Old Ben makes himself a useful member of the family by ridding the crib of rats that destroy the corn. Even Blackie learns to love Old Ben. The family cares tenderly for the unusual pet. Shan leaves milk for him and his mother provides a burlap bag for his bed. Sorry to say, this camaraderie does not last. Old Ben disappears one day and Shan hopes that he has escaped the pigs in a nearby pen and will return in the spring. Nevertheless, Ben has stayed with the family long enough to teach them that even snakes can be loved. And Shan has learned the joy of loving a snake and the sorrow of losing him.[142]

A book-length dog story for young people (and adults) is *Mongrel Mettle*.[143] Narrated in the first person—or rather, first dog—from the point of view of a mongrel puppy, this is the story of canine maturation. The young puppy lacks a pedigree and thus must make his own mark in the world. In order to earn his "mettle," he goes on a picaresque journey. His many masters and experiences over a period of five years on the road help him achieve his doghood. His first owner gives him—in a sad scene separating him from his mother—to a little girl named Glenna Powderjay. The Powderjay family already owns two dogs: Red-Rusty, a pure bred Irish setter, and an old dog nicknamed Sir Robert by the other dogs because of his assumed self-importance and the fact that he once killed a polecat. Both older dogs already have identities. They already have names. The mongrel must earn his own. As the puppy's first tutor in selfhood, Red-Rusty teaches him to hunt.

When Glenna leaves home for college, the mongrel is lonely and decides it is time to go into the world to seek his fortune. During his wanderings he lives with five families. The Dodderidges find out that he is sucking eggs and killing chickens and almost kill him while he is escaping. The Hollis Hammonds household is home for him until his master elopes with another woman. In the town of Greenupsburg he is adopted by Zeke Hammertight, who already has eighteen dogs. The country dog scorns the soft city poodles and shows his vicious streak when he attacks and tries to kill them. Later, while living with a moonshiner, Mongrel is introduced to the joys of moonshine broth. This episode is abruptly ended when revenue agents break up their still and take his master away. His last adventure is with a henpecked husband. The most meaningful of his experiences, however, occurs during a six-month visit with a family of foxes. While he recuperates from the wounds inflicted by Master Dodderidge, the foxes protect and feed him. For a while he is thoroughly seduced by the call of the wild. He runs with his new friends and once attends a foxes clan at Buzzard Roost, a fox fortress among the rocks. There he meets and develops a quick crush on a fair young vixen, Fair Fox, with whom he lives happily for a time. Together they run, hunt, outwit the hunters and their foxhounds and bark to the moon and stars. This interlude ends when Fair Fox deserts him to be with her own kind.

Finally, he has matured sufficiently to return where he started. He finds that in his absence his first mistress has married and acquired another dog—Dossie, the dog of his dreams and "a pedigreed lady" to boot. She likes him too. The prospects are good for a "more Democratic World of Dogs" when the strains of mongrel mettle and pedigree blood mix. This story of a picaro-dog is an impressive fable that exposes human frailties and cruelties. Had not Mongrel Mettle used his wits, he would never have survived his foray into the world. The book is also a journal of the pains and joys of growing up and becoming somebody—a "name." At last, Jerry-B Boneyard Powderjay Dodderidge Fox Hammonds Laken Hammertight Blevins Doore, the Mongrel deserves his "mettle."

The popular *Taps for Private Tussie* (it has sold well over a million copies) is Stuart's most extensive and successful *Bildungsroman.* The novel is also his most consistently humorous. Ruel Foster calls it "a comic ballad"[144] and Lee Pennington has written that the novel made Stuart "a major American humorist." Pennington assesses the novel's humor: "Humor is, if not the total concern of *Taps for Private Tussie,* at least a primary concern of the novel—the source of much of the richness of the characters."[145] Indeed. And the candid recorder of the humor is one of the most winning narrators in American fiction since Huckleberry Finn. "thirteen, fourteen, maybe fifteen"-year-old Sid Tussie, in fact, is a latter-day hill equivalent of the Missouri boy. If Huck finds a father figure in "Nigger Jim," Sid likewise searches and finds his own.

Before, however, Sid finds and is acknowledged by his "father," he must grow up. Or he must be well on his way. The novel is essentially an account of this process. Set near Greenwood during World War II, the book covers the ways a supposedly dead soldier's insurance money affects his family's life-style. The body of Sid's "Uncle" Kim is brought home for burial, and Kim's widow and his numerous kin begin to spend the insurance fortune. Sid lives with his Grandfather and Grandmother Tussie, who he thinks may be his father and mother, and with his "Aunt Vittie," Kim's wife, and with Mott, Sid's good-for-nothing uncle. During the summer they appropriate the empty schoolhouse, but with the approach of school days and with their windfall wealth, they rent a fancy house. Aided by the Tussie kin that descend upon them to share the spoils of Kim's sacrifice, they almost destroy the "mansion" they are renting. Their money runs out and they are evicted. With the last of the insurance money, Aunt Vittie has bought a small farm and shack in the hills. The Tussies are living there when Uncle Kim returns unexpectedly. His death report and body had been erroneous.

Sid's informal education begins early. His lazy, "down-in-the-back" Grandpa, his almost equally sorry Grandma and his ruthless, alcoholic Uncle Mott introduce him to a world of irresponsibility and sordidness. Grandpa is the head of the "Relief Tussies" and receives what he calls a "pension" from the government. He is, however, never too tired or ill to drink and dance all night. All along, Uncle Mott has known that Kim is not dead. It was he who opened the military coffin and intentionally misidentified his brother's body. His reason? He wants to marry Aunt Vittie. Mott's grotesque description of the body is reported by Sid: "After I opened the coffin and let fresh air into Kim—I could see more flesh a-goin. It was a-goin fast." (p. 14) Neither of these kinsmen seems to have influenced Sid very much.

Like Mark Twain, Stuart creates a narrator who reports honestly—almost naively—what he sees and thinks. In so doing he exposes evils such as hypocrisy, stupidity and selfishness. Despite its outlandish plot and grotesque characters, the novel is believable—largely because the reader believes in the reliability of the narrator. Sid is convincingly honest. He tells the truth about everyone—including himself. He is like the eye of a camera. At the funeral, held in the schoolhouse, Sid observes that a lot of courting is going on. He notes that the mourners in the procession to the graveyard laugh, talk and continue their courting. Only Aunt Vittie seems affected by the death: "Everybody else seemed to be havin a good time. It was better than pitchin hoss-shoes on Sunday or a-ridin the mountain paths on mules a-shootin at the lizards with their pistols as they scurried over the rocks and up the sprouts." (p. 25) Sid is objective but compassionate. When he sees Aunt Vittie crying at the funeral, he comments: "It touched me to hear her weep; maybe that was why that I thought she was so pretty." (p. 26)

The upheaval caused by Kim's death makes Sid more aware of the insensitivity of the Tussies in regard to their own kin. He hears one of the Tussie relatives, obviously envious of Grandpa's sudden wealth, say: "I know some of my boys are in the army and I don't know whether any of 'em has been kilt 'r not. Wished I knowed. There might be something a-waitin for me." (p. 88) Sid learns that there is little or no sense of family honor among the Tussies. But he lives by his wits and knows when to speak and when to ponder things in his mind. Once he says that "I could have told Uncle Mott that Uncle George was a kinder man than he was. But it wouldn't do for me to tell Uncle Mott this." (p. 93) Sid can be a diplomat when he needs to be.

For a time Sid finds a father substitute in his "grandfather's" brother, Uncle George, who has returned from the West to die among his native hills. He is an elderly Earth Father who has been married five times. His life in the West and his fiddle playing represent to Sid the free and natural life. At first, Uncle George refuses to bathe in a bathtub because, he says, "it looks like a white coffin." He and Sid wash themselves in a clear, cold creek. His fiddle tunes are a musical interpretation of the action of the book, and they change with the fortunes of the Tussie characters. His aliveness makes him attractive, in spite of his age, to Aunt Vittie—in many ways an Earth Mother—and they are married. Uncle Mott is furious at the loss of his brother's "widow" and shoots the old man's fiddle to pieces. Uncle George instinctively reacts by killing Mott and flees with a sheriff and posse in pursuit.

While they are living together in the Tussie hill shack, Uncle George and Aunt Vittie introduce the innocent Sid to sex. Sid has to sleep in the same room with the honeymooning couple and complains that their night noises keep him awake. Not even a partition of quilts helps very much, and he finds himself dozing during the day.

When Uncle George kills Uncle Mott, Sid feels sorrow for the dead man. He sounds very much Like Huck Finn: "It made me feel sorry over the things that I had said about Uncle Mott. I was sorry now that I had even thought in my mind that I didn't care if Uncle Mott froze stiff as a possum's tail some winter night when he was a-layin out drunk. I was sorry for all these things now that Uncle Mott was dead." (p. 288) Sid's compassion extends to wild animals. Uncle Mott would shoot animals while they sleep: "But I hated to kill the rabbits that way; I liked to scare them out and give 'em a chance for their lives." (p. 211) Sid also senses the wasted life Grandpa Tussie has lived and is sad that the old man began to love the land so near his death.

With a childlike honesty, however, Sid reveals the failings of his people. The Tussies, for example, sell their votes to the highest bidder, though they never like the sheriff they help elect: "The reason was, the Tussies never liked the laws. They never like to be told what to do. They wanted to do as they pleased and get all they could without havin' to work for it. I hate to say this about my people but it was the truth." (p. 142) Once Sid notices a stranger at their rented house and decides quickly that he is not a Tussie: "He wore pants that were threadbare at the knees; but the seat of his pants wasn't wore slick like Grandpa's, Uncle Mott's and Uncle George's. The seat of his pants looked new. I should have known by the knees of his pants he wasn't a Tussie. I'd never seen a Tussie's pants worn out at the knees." (p. 132) The stranger turns out to be the hard-working owner of the house the Tussies are destroying.

Although Sid is a teenager, he has never had any formal schooling—that is, until the authorities find out and remind Grandpa of the state's compulsory school attendance law. But Sid is as quick to learn in school as he is outside. Within six months he is promoted to the fourth grade, despite the fact that he has difficulty getting enough sleep during the time Uncle George and Aunt Vittie are sleeping together in the room with him.

Sid never indulges in self-pity, but the sensitive boy must have felt very lonely in a family that usually ignored him. When a new relative arrives to live in their rented house, Sid reports matter-of-factly: "I waited for Grandpa to introduce me but he didn't notice me." (p. 88) His love is never reciprocated. Before Uncle Kim left for the army, Sid had doted upon the older man. Kim had never been kind to him and barely acknowledged his presence. Despite Kim's treatment of him, Sid is constantly remembering him. While they are living in the house Kim's death money rented, Sid comments: "Though Uncle Kim didn't like me and I knew that he didn't like me, I thought these things about him. I knew that Uncle Kim passed through my brain more than he did any other brain in the George Rayburn house." (p. 126) Then Kim returns as from the dead and Sid thinks excitedly: "I wondered as Uncle Kim talked if he's a-goin to treat me like he treated me before he went to war. He had seen everybody and talked to them but he hadn't noticed me yet . . . I wished that I was as big and as powerful a man as Uncle Kim was. I had always liked Uncle Kim but he had never seemed to like me." (p. 295) The war has made Kim a different person, however, and he does notice Sid. He also explains that before he left he had mistreated Sid because Sid was not his son. He had been paid, he says, to marry Aunt Vittie, Sid's mother, when another man had made the fourteen-year-old girl pregnant. Now, he says, he knows he loves her and can love her son by another man.

Although Sid does not now understand the significance of all that has happened, he has found his "father" and his mother. Life is going to be better for a boy who has spent his young life in the school of hard knocks. Sid concludes his narrative: "Uncle Mott was dead, Grandpa was dyin and Uncle Kim was lovin, all in the same room . . . . It seemed like a dream, but it wasn't a dream for I felt life surge through my body and I felt warmth from the big fire." (p. 303) Surrounded by the dead and the dying, excited by the coming of new life and love and equipped with a reservoir of maturation experiences—some of which will make sense in later years—Sid is beginning to live as a man. With this novel Stuart has made an outstanding contribution to the literature of selfhood.

All of life should be educational, of course, but that part that we organize and set aside as "school" plays a crucial role in a person's maturation. Stuart's father could barely write his name, and his mother went only as far as the second grade. But they wanted their son to be educated and to become a teacher. He attended Plum Grove School, Greenup High School, Lincoln Memorial University, Peabody College and Vanderbilt University. Throughout his life he has been devoted to teaching as, in his words, "the greatest profession in the world." He has been a teacher, principal, lecturer, college professor and a creative writing instructor at workshops. (An annual Jesse Stuart Creative Writing Workshop is conducted each summer at Murray State University in Kentucky.) He has been the subject of books, theses, dissertations, school papers, scholarly articles; yet he never finished his own graduate degrees. Two sonnets in *Man With a Bull-Tongue Plow* allude humorously to his need for a Ph.D.:

> I learned it did not take a Ph.D.

[146]

He also did not need a Ph.D. to become a teacher and a writer.

Stuart's autobiographical writings about education contain many humorous characters and incidents. In *To Teach, To Love,* for example, he tells of two grade school boys who urinate in the bucket of water they have been sent by their teacher to the well to fetch for the class. The teacher and pupils discover the prank too late. (pp. 36-37)

Probably Stuart's most widely read book today is *The Thread That Runs So True,* his chronicle on the challenges and rewards of a Kentucky hill teacher and principal in the 1920's.[147] It is a testimonial to education and an inspirational tribute to teachers. Before he was seventeen, Stuart accepted an appointment as teacher of thirty-five pupils at Lonesome Valley School. In order to claim his job and the respect of students and community, he had to fight one of the first graders. His challenger is Guy Hawkins. He has been in the first grade for eight years and he shaves. In a no-holds-barred fight Stuart earns his right to teach. Then he begins innovations that he has insisted upon all his life. He promotes his defeated first-grader, allows mixed seating in the classroom, insists that each pupil have his own drinking cup, paints the school house, limes the outdoor toilets to keep away flies and makes learning a game. He also makes the mistake of calling on a young lady whose boyfriend organizes a waylaying party that pelts Stuart's white suit with tomatoes, rotten eggs, good eggs, apples, squash, pumpkins and melons. He learns to be a diplomat when he discovers that the beautiful fourteen-year-old daughter of a school trustee chews tobacco and spits it on his freshly painted schoolhouse. And he has to uncover the artist who draws obscene pictures in the boys' toilet.

Five years later he graduates from Lincoln Memorial University and becomes the one-man faculty for the fourteen pupils at Winston High School. At Winston he has several geniuses to contend with, including the remarkable Budge Waters: "The amount of work I gave them depended upon how much I wanted to study ahead." (p. 73) Their eagerness to learn motivated him to do a lot of overtime studying. Later, as principal of the larger Landsburgh High School, he sets up a formal fight between two football players in order to settle their families' long-standing feud. Among his other duties, as superintendent of the county schools, he has to resolve conflicts between school board members and visit the schools in his district. One of his visits is to a remote school on top of a mountain. The teacher is a huge woman who sometimes is heaved to the top by her pupils. When the ground is icy, they let her down with ropes. Although she started teaching when she finished the fifth grade years before, she has just completed her college degree—at the age of almost seventy.

While he was principal of Maxwell High School, Stuart encountered another problem. Toodle Powell, a football player, has an uncontrollable urge, he says, to bite whenever he tackles a man. The coach decides to muzzle him with a set of headgear. The stratagem works until the strap breaks during a game and Toodle starts to do what he must. After teaching remedial English at Dartmouth High School in Ohio, he ends seventeen years of courting and proposes to Naomi Deane Norris. He also vows to quit teaching, raise sheep and write a novel.

Not all his plans were implemented, for Stuart has never been very long away from the classroom or school lecture platform. In 1956, when he was still recuperating from his heart attack, he accepted a position as principal of McKell High School. *Mr. Gallion's School* is based on his experiences there.[148] One day Mr. Gallion goes with his wife into Greenwood to get a haircut and ends up as principal of Kensington High School. The sons and daughters of the pupils he taught in his youth are now in school, and they are a different lot. His problems at Kensington include lack of money, scarcity of teachers, rebellious students, overcrowded classrooms, criticism from parents and school board members, football game fights, girls who pack the commodes with toilet paper and one student who digs up graves. The local people think that only a person who is either broke or losing his mind would take over the school. Because the times are more serious and the students less responsive, this book contains less humor than his earlier ones on teaching. Nevertheless, it is an entertaining book. Mr. Gallion utilizes "board of education" paddles for disciplining students. He concocts the strategy of allow-only honor students to serve on the crews removing gum from chairs and desks. He promises a husky football prospect that he will make the team—if the boy's mother will sign a contract to teach English. The challenges of the year have been good therapy, but for a man with a weak heart, a second year would have been excessive. Or so his doctor tells him.

Stuart and his characters grow up in the hills through experiences that are sometimes quite different from those that non-hill people have. Only the trappings, however, are different. The process of becoming a mature individual is the same for all.

THE STATE OF POLITICS

"Reports sent beyond this state that we didn't count our election votes until we had counted our dead had good factual foundation." Stuart made this observation in *The Thread That Runs So True.* (p. 162) Election violence is not so common in Kentucky any more, but Kentuckians still take their politics very seriously. They are also greatly amused by politics and politicians. A state that has produced such colorful and witty politicians as J. Proctor Knott, Alben Barkley and A. B. "Happy" Chandler is a fertile ground for political humor and satire. In Stuart's hill country politics can be a deadly serious affair and a contest of wits at the same time.

Even school trustee elections are sometimes avidly contested. Church might be pitted against church, wet against dry, clan against clan or husband against wife. Stuart describes in *The Thread That Runs So True* what might not have been an atypical trustee election: "Guns were often brought into play at these elections. Men were killed and seriously wounded. People were stabbed with knives. Men fought with clubs and rocks. Often the schoolyard where one of these elections was held turned out to be the scene of a brawl. Often as many as twenty men were lying on the grass knocked senseless while forty or fifty more fought over their prone bodies, stepping on them, until the county sheriff and a posse of deputies had to be called." (p. 163)

The hill man is no more evil than men elsewhere, but he needs the protection of the law. And he needs government officials to enforce it. In "Before the Grand Jury"[149] a man tells of his summons to appear before a grand jury determined to clean up the county. The man is questioned about such items as people in his community who might carry concealed weapons, sell "pizened" liquor or use vile words in the presence of ladies. During one session the grand jury returned six hundred indictments, mostly for petty offences. The narrator judges: "Sometimes the ways of the Law don't seem right sensible."

Indeed they don't when one party is divided into Greenough and Dinwiddie factions. An independent voter in "Governor Warburton's Right-hand Man"[150] prides himself on his objectivity in viewing party in-fighting: "I just couldn't go for politics and politicians. . . . But the Greenoughs and the Dinwiddies did things that made me laugh. I could laugh louder at some of the things they did than I could at the comic strips in our newspapers." Poetic justice is done when this proud independent makes himself a potential source of humor as he becomes unwittingly enmeshed in politics. He attends a political rally as an observer to see the fun start—and maybe some fighting—when the governor names a party head for the county. Vying for the position are the leaders of the two factions, but the governor wisely decides to name as chairman the only independent present.

In *God's Oddling* Stuart portrays his father, Mick, as a dyed-in-the-wool Republican. During one election he campaigns for his party's candidate for county judge because he has been promised that a road will be built by his house—if the Republican wins. The Republican wins but no road is built. (pp. 202-214)[151] Mick is a true-blue party man and manages to forget such slights. He sticks with his party through thick and thin. And once the county jailor complains that he is getting thin because one of his Republican prisoners is eating four chickens per meal. The man's enormous appetite is costing him more than the dollar a day he is paid for keeping him. He, therefore, asks stalwart party man Mick to collect money from fellow Republicans to pay the prisoner's fine. Answering his party's call, Mick does just that. As an old man, Stuart writes in *God's Oddling,* his father still proselytized for the Republicans. When he finds out that his eldest daughter has registered as a Democrat, he is shocked, disillusioned and fighting mad—since, he says, she was born a Republican. The erring daughter retorts that her mother was not a Republican. Mick then reminds her that she was born a Stuart. That is the name she took at birth, not her mother's; hence she is a Republican. The dutiful daughter changes her registration.

Grandpa Tussie, the head of the "Relief Tussies" in *Taps for Private Tussie,* was also once a Republican. But he has good reason to switch parties: "I's allus a Republican until this relief thing come along. It looked like too good a thing to pass up. I didn't mind to cross over to the other side and makin my cross!" (p. 37) One wonders if Stuart's satire directed at the Democrats perhaps betrays his own party affiliation.

Chicanery, vote-buying, opportunism and other assorted rottenness oftentimes decided the outcome of hill elections. As a student at Lincoln Memorial University on election day in 1928, Stuart admits participation (in *To Teach , To Love*) in a bit of voting irregularity. He and several other students were taken from poll to poll by the deputy sheriff where they voted each time for Herbert Hoover, who carried that Tennessee county "by a fantastic majority." "Thirty-two Votes before Breakfast"[152] is a fictional account of a similar ploy. A carload of men drive to thirty-two precincts and vote, each time using the name of a dead person or one who has moved away but whose name is still on the rolls. They expect no trouble because at each polling place two of the three election judges are on the side of the bogus voters. At one precinct, however, the narrator is exposed as a fake when he poses as a well known local preacher. A candidate for county prosecuting attorney in "The People Choose"[153] pretends to be on both sides of two large feuding families, reaps votes from both camps and wins the election. His election is fortuitous, however, because he dismisses indictments against members of both families and reconciles them. Then, as previously agreed with his opponent, he prepares to place the losing candidate in a barrel and roll him from the top of a nearby hill. Any amount of connivance and underhanded strategy is permissible—and admired—in a political contest. Usually the most inventive candidate wins. Elections seldom focus on issues in Stuart's fiction, but on personalities and family connections.

Once a successful candidate is in office, his supporters naturally expect him to make good on his campaign promises. He is seldom able to, and after a while they are forgotten. Like Mick Stuart's Republican county judge, "Rabbit" Bascom of "Governor Warburton's Right-hand Man" fails to follow up his road-building campaign oratory. When citizens come to complain, he tells them not to worry because the approaching winter will be a mild one. His prognostication earns him his nickname. The farmers know that only a rabbit can predict the weather. So the citizens laugh at their politicians, disregard many of the laws they make—and get ready for the next election—which in Kentucky is probably the day after tomorrow.

THAT OLD-TIME RELIGION

Mick Stuart tried to make all his children into Republicans. He also tried to make them Methodists. He evidently thought that both allegiances had the favor of Providence. But so did the Democrats and Baptists. Religion is, indeed, a serious concern of most hill people. For the Stuart reader this concern is often humorous. In her ***Jesse Stuart's Kentucky*** Mary Washington Clarke attests to Stuart's treatment of religion: "With less of social protest than of humor, Jesse Stuart has brought alive the *old-time religion* with its narrow intolerance, its dark superstition, and at the same time its undeniable sustaining power." (p. 55) Almost Puritanlike in their reading of signs and natural phenomena as communications from God, the hill man learned to accept his lot in life as submission to the divine will. Against a background of usually bleak economic conditions, this kind of religion accounts mainly for the basic fatalism in hill philosophy. One of Stuart's characters speculates on why God made mountains because walking would be easier if the land were level. Then, remembering that God does everything for a purpose, he says that perhaps God designed mountains to teach man endurance.[154]

Righteous rivalry among the various Christian denominations—especially the Methodist and Baptist—is a serious sport for Stuart's people. His own family was split along denominational lines. In "Uncle Fonse Laughed"[155] Shan Powderjay speaks of the good-natured, but serious, arguments his father and a neighbor have over politics and religion. In this story both men are Baptists, but Baptists of a different breed. (The autonomy of each Baptist congregation encourages the growth of splinter sects, particularly among independent-thinking hill people.) Uncle Fonse belongs to the Forty Gallon variety, and Mick is a member of the Slab persuasion. During a debate Uncle Fonse correctly predicts his imminent death, and Mick hears the dead man laugh as he had said he would: "Mick, you ought to be in my church. To prove to you we are right, if I die first you'll hear me laugh out there in the little pine grove where we always went on Sundays to talk and whittle by that salt-trough. If you die first I'll go out there and see if I can hear you laugh or speak to me first. And we'll see who's right—the Slabs or the Forty Gallons—" Although Mick does hear Uncle Fonse laugh first, Shan fails to record whether the laughter caused his father to change his sect. Probably not.

The two churches in Lonesome Valley in *The Thread That Runs So True* separate the people in the here and the hereafter: "There was a Faith Healing Holiness heaven and a Free Will Baptist heaven. The two churches fought it out like two rival stores, across the street from each other, selling the same kind of merchandise, manufactured by the same company, yet each merchant giving a slightly different sales talk to the people ready to buy." (p. 24) Religious competition is also the subject of "Snake Teeth."[156] In this story an eighteen-year-old Forty Gallon Baptist attends a brush arbor revival being conducted by the beautiful lady preacher of the Unknown Tongue Church. Quoting the Bible, she commands, "Thou shalt take up Serpents"—which she proceeds to do. She allows a snake to writhe over her body and bite her, whereupon an older Baptist skeptic declares the snake to be toothless. The young Baptist lover, however, has been bitten by the love bug and rushes home to get a copperhead with which the lady can prove her faith. When he confesses to her later that his snake also has no teeth, she feels that he is an unbeliever and leaves him.

Religious dissension within a family can follow a man to his grave. In "Death and Decision"[157] Shan Shelton covers his grandfather's death and the subsequent controversy over whether a minister of the Old Faith or one of the New Faith should preach the funeral sermon. The believers in the Old Faith finally win the argument, and their minister spends one hour and forty minutes preaching against heretics who place flowers and musical instruments in the church and who are in favor of education. He barely mentions the dead man before him. The seething anger of the two sects, however, bursts out at the grave site and a macabre fight lasts almost an hour. Shan's description of the scene is like an excerpt from the humor of the Old Southwest: "We had to pull several of the men apart and made them stop biting, gouging, hitting, and clawing. There was blood on the ground. Tombstones, pots of flowers, and vases with faded flowers were turned over. Shrubbery and living flowers were flattened on the ground." Possibly this is the last such graveyard battle, for Grandfather Shelton's body may be the last one over which both faiths will contend. As one of the bereaved announces: "From now on, let the Old Faith bury their dead and we'll bury our own."

The hill preacher was a very important personage to his communicants. Frequently, he was "called" to preach in the middle of a hot cornfield, and just as frequently he had to learn to read so he could preach the Word of God directly from the Bible. Sid Tussie discloses that Brother Baggs, the man who preaches Kim's funeral in *Taps for Private Tussie*, "didn't know his A.B.C.s until after the Lord called him to preach. Then he got the light and his A.B.C.s come to him so he could read the Word." (p. 17) One may question the accuracy of biblical messages derived from such speedy literacy; nevertheless, the reverend was a revered man in most households, and the fattest fryers were saved for his Sunday dinners.

Preachers and ordinary people enjoyed going to church. In addition to the religious and moral values they received, there were social pleasures to be enjoyed. Many a couple did their courting in and around the church house. Saving sinners and keeping fallible church members from backsliding too much were, however, the chief aims of church attendance. In *God's Oddling* Stuart re-creates the revivals of his youth that lasted from two to five weeks, depending upon "how many people needed salvation." Sometimes the same person would be saved each year. Sometimes the meetings would last all night, and the next day men would drowse at the plow and women would nod over their churns. One winter night Stuart's father and mother, he writes, wrestled at length with the devil, aided in their struggle by five Baptist preachers. The next day a hole was chopped in the ice and they were baptized.

Baptism by immersion (usually in creeks or rivers) and footwashing were common ordinances in many Baptist churches, but some of the more radical sects included in their services the speaking in unknown tongues and the handling of snakes. The Melungeons of *Daughter of the Legend* participate in both rituals as a testimony of their faith. They keep caged snakes near their cabins for use in their services. The somewhat skeptical narrator observes women who demonstrate their faith by putting their hands into flaming pine torches. One woman screams that the flames cannot burn her, but the narrator notes: "I knew the flame was searing her flesh, the way she twitched." (p. 91)

A story allegedly based on fact, "Rain on Tanyard Hollow,"[158] shows the efficacy of prayer whether practiced in church or in a strawberry patch. This farce demonstrates how a man's prayer for rain is answered with a vengeance. At first the man tries to break a prolonged drouth by killing black snakes and hanging them on the fence. His wife tells him that only prayer will bring rain but that the Lord won't listen to him because he is too sinful. Rising to the challenge, the supplicant falls to his knees among his scorched strawberry plants and orders the Lord to answer his plea for rain—a lot of rain: "Send rain, Lord, that will wash gully-ditches in this strawberry patch big enough to bury a mule in. . . . Wash trees out by the roots . . . make the weak have fears and the strong tremble." The man's son, serving as narrator, comments: "I didn't bother with Pappie's prayer but I thought that was too much rain." Indeed, it is. As soon as the auditors have laughed at the prayer, storm clouds begin to collect and soon the petition is answered in full—with several extra measures. His frightened wife pleads with the master of prayer to ask that the storm stop, but he chides: "I ain't two-faced enough to ast the Lord fer somethin' like a lot of people and atter I git it—turn around and ast the Lord to take it away." By the time the rain finally stops, the entire family has begun to take prayer—even the prayer of a sinner—seriously.

Some skeptics maintain that man created the devil to relieve himself of the intolerable burden of being responsible for his own evil. Be that as it may, the hill man spends little thought in speculating on the Evil One's origins, but he spends a great amount of time in his presence. Some of Stuart's characters have frequent visits from Old Scratch. In a poem, "Jackie Sizemore," the speaker recounts one encounter he has had:

As sure as God, I know I seen the Devil
/
]
.[159]

Luckily, Sizemore is able to pray the devil away. But the power of the devil is supported by many people, including the speaker in "Clid Claxon to Jackie Sizemore." Taking a diabolical position, Clid asserts that "The Devil is a man to be respected." The poor demon is never treated sympathetically and everyone says he scorns him: "Great multitudes so long have been engaged/ To oust this warrior from his little throne." And yet with all the world apparently against him, the valiant soldier has survived. That accomplishment obviously impresses Clid.[160]

The living devil manifests himself in many guises. His face is often glimpsed in new-fangled entertainments, such as in motion pictures and on the television screen. "The Devil and Television"[161] is a sketch of a man who is churched by his Church of the Old Faith for owning a television set. The sinner's son relates his father's circumspect life—up to a point: "Pa hadn't attended a circus. He hadn't gone to a movie. He hadn't seen a horse race. He hadn't smoked or chewed the fragrant weed and drank the violent water. Pa hadn't even read the funny papers." But Pa had bought a television set, which he enjoyed immensely. One Sunday the Old Faith pastor preaches a sermon entitled "The Devil Has Many Faces"—including a television face. The sermon fails to rescue the perishing sinner, who decides to keep his television and go to his wife's church, where fun is not a mortal sin.

The Old Faith preacher sees the devil's face on the television screen, and he probably has also seen the face of God elsewhere. At least, some of Stuart's characters vow that they have seen God. In a sonnet colloquium—"Mel Hunt," "Charlie Hunt" and "Lucretia Hunt"—Mel reports that he has seen God smoking a pipe and wiping the ashes from his long beard. Charlie questions his father's anthropomorphic vision of God, concluding: "Is that gin on your breath, Pa, that I smell?/ A-lying on God and you as drunk as hell!" His mother, Lucretia, attacks Charlie for his harshness toward his father, explaining that Mel drinks to forget a man he once killed in cold blood and it is then that he sees God.[162]

Heaven is a joyous hope—or rather, certainty—for most of Stuart's people. It is the antithesis of the pains and sorrow of their life on earth. They are certain, however, that it will contain the good things of this life, including fiddling and dancing. (This is, of course, only one of many hill conceptions of heaven—and surely does not include those people who oppose fiddling and dancing as sinful whether done on earth or in heaven.) The "Blind" Frailey sonnets in *Man With a Bull-Tongue Plow* describe a man in patched pants who goes to town each first Monday to play his fiddle on the courthouse square for the country people who come to dance. He'll surely get to heaven and fiddle right on through those pearly gates:

"Blind" Frailey doesn't know the flats and sharps, And he will fiddle up the golden streets to where the Lord sits enthroned in His golden chair. And the Lord will permit him to play the old familiar Kentucky dance tunes and He will laugh from His chair. The sonnets conclude that if Plum Grove folks can be sure Blind Frailey will be in heaven with his fiddle, they will all be more zealous to go there and dance all day and night.[163]

Alas, not everyone will hear Blind Frailey play in heaven. The sinners will be sent elsewhere. And only God knows who will go where. Well, God and maybe Grandma Shelton, who rises briefly from the "dead" in "Settin'-Up with Grandma"[164] to report that her drunkard son, Uncle Jeff—the unlikeliest heavenly prospect—is already in gloryland. But, strangely, she did not see many of the "good" people everyone expected to be in bliss. Only eternity will tell whether Grandma's deathbed vision is accurate. In the meantime, Stuart recommends that every one enjoy the good earth. One of his early poems, "Saint or Sinner," preaches a "sinner's" poetic sermon to mortals:

Since we are fruit of a human tree

.[165]

A FORETASTE OF GLORY DIVINE

Most of Stuart's characters profess to look forward to their heavenly reward. But when the trumpet of the Lord apparently sounds on September 18, 1941, in Blakesburg, Kentucky, not many are quite ready to claim their wings and robes. In one of the most underrated and ignored novels of contemporary American fiction, Stuart pulls back the curtains to expose the frailties of man that make him such a choice butt of humor and an appropriate object of satire. Ironically, the title is taken from "Blessed Assurance," a popular Fanny Crosby hymn in which the anticipation of eschatology is a foretaste of glory:

> Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!

Few of Blakesburg's citizens are "filled with His goodness" or "lost in His love." They are merely "lost." And they could hardly be "watching and waiting" for the Second Coming with much delight. But in *Foretaste of Glory* a strange sight causes them to look above and shake in their sins.

Blakesburg is a sleepy Southern river town inhabited by people who are no better or worse than people anywhere else. It is a microcosm, mirroring character types, life-styles and human behavior to be found around the world. What makes them temporarily different is the sudden appearance one evening of a vast aerial fireworks that portends to them the end of the world. Actually, the heavenly display is the *aurora borealis* or Northern Lights, as a retired minister tries to tell them, but they are too frightened over the sudden illumination of their dark secrets to heed him. They scurry around frantically trying to put their sordid lives and houses in order so that they might be ready to meet Christ the Judge, whom they expect to see momentarily descend from the clouds. The novel is a rogues gallery of portraits brought out into the searing light of the sun on the deck of a Ship of Fools. These Dorian Gray pictures reveal man's hidden crudity, pettiness, cruelty, greed and violence—those traits which he often tries to veil or deny but which are usually the ruling forces of his life. They are the facets of man's make-up that humor is uniquely equipped to reveal. *Foretaste of Glory* is, therefore, an excellent illustration and summary of the sources and manifestations of humor.

Naturally, man does not like to be reminded of the base, selfish parts of himself. He prefers to believe that his mask is his real nature. Stuart's satirical humor has resulted in much bitter criticism of his works by people who believe that he unfairly represents man in general and the hill people in particular. In *The Year of My Rebirth* he records his reaction to the outrage caused by this novel and some of his other books: "People declared I had hurt my part of America, my state, home town, and friends. They claimed my books were not true pictures. The criticism that hurt me most was of *Foretaste of Glory,* which appeared in 1946, shortly after I was released from service. This book was so unpopular I almost gave up." (p. 261) Stuart is not alone in suffering criticism for his "untruthful" books about the South. He is in the literary company of such writers as Erskine Caldwell, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty and William Faulkner.

Understandably, however, readers were upset over the novel. The indictment of man's evil is as devastating as that in Mark Twain's "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg." The main difference is that Stuart's novel is more extensive and plausible than Twain's allegorical short story. Twain can only sketch the corruption of the nineteen leading families of his town. Stuart's characters are developed in depth, and his microcosm includes patterns of behavior not touched in Twain's story. War, for instance. Stuart writes that during World War I a realistic make-believe war was fought between Blakesburg's East End boys and West End boys. They dug trenches and used rocks as missiles. They even had one piece of artillery, a double-barreled shotgun. Blakesburg's history is also surveyed at some length. The site of the town was once Indian land, but the Founding Fathers used their flintrock rifles and hunting knives to drive the Indians out.

Conflicts within the town of some 2000 souls are caused, in part, by its division into two (often armed) camps: the Dinwiddies and the Greenoughs. Based in politics, the factions also hold irreconcilable beliefs in religion, in journalism (each side has its own newspaper) and in burial practices. Blakesburg, in addition, has its own home-grown class struggle between the Blue Bloods, descendants of the First Families, and the Red Necks, upstarts from the country who, like Faulkner's Snopes clan, have moved into town and are assuming positions of economic and political influence. The citizens of Blakesburg also have a "foreign enemy," the Red Necks who still live in the outlying hills and come into town to trade and get drunk. To defend themselves against the invaders, the City Fathers ban horse swapping except on Saturdays and each first Monday of the month.

And so the smugly satisfied town is ripe for exposure of its ugly underbelly. The heavenly lights appear to unleash the chaos barely below the surface. The town jailor frees his prisoners, who flee down the crowded streets cursing because they have not been released earlier. The live fowl awaiting slaughter in the Produce House are freed and join the general bedlam. Like the sinners in Michael Wigglesworth's colonial poem, "Day of Doom," the citizens rush madly about to find a hiding place. Using the persona of an omniscient narrator—well acquainted with the town—who speaks in the third person, Stuart draws his people in flight, filling in sufficient personal background to make meaningful each person's radical response to the Lights.

These are the people who expect to be soon in the presence of their Judge: Tiddis Fortner, who supplies Blakesburg's first citizens with their bootleg whiskey and enjoys the protection of the law. He rushes to his house—or "harem," as it is derisively known—where he cares for erring and homeless women. Horace Blevins, who has built a prosperous business in antiques by buying old pieces of furniture and other items from the Red Necks and re-selling them at huge mark-ups to the first ladies of Blakesburg. The Lights discover the ladies quarreling and fighting over barrels of just-delivered "antiques." Charlie Allbright, who feigns a disability to receive an insurance pension. He panics, throws away his crutches and hides from the Christ he is certain is about to materialize in the sky. His haste may have cost him his leisure, as one observer notes: "If the world don't end, Charlie's shore as God lost his insurance this time . . . ." (p. 242)

Joe Dingus, who exploits the crisis when he finds the county attorney penned in his car by one hundred and twenty-one crossties and charges him one dollar for each one he removes. Temperance and Ollie Spradling, who get drunk often and amuse bystanders with their street fights. The Lights interrupt their current brawl and she faints, but the spectators are afraid to come to her aid "in a time like this." Jeff Hargis, once a prosperous family man who never used the Lord's name in vain. He would substitute "sugar" for the usual reference to the Deity. He was a kind father to his eleven children—until he chanced to taste liquor for the first time. After that, he was drunk for four years. He lost his wealth and went to live with his sister and her family near Blakesburg. He sees the Lights as he is returning from town drunk and seeks refuge under a strange bed, where he is exposed when he keeps muttering "Woo-woo!"

The Reverend Perry Rhoden, who has not kept a solemn promise he made to God. When he first came to Blakesburg, he told his parishioners, he had been called to clean out the town's sin and corruption. He gets sidetracked from his mission when he learns that he is losing his marriage trade to a local undertaking parlor and a justice of the peace. He hires his son to stand at the bridge to direct couples to his parlor.

He agonized for a while over his plans but promises God: "I will build You the nicest temple in Blakesburg if You will permit me to accept this business." (p. 188) God evidently approves of business, for the preacher's marriage trade has prospered. But the Lights shine on no temple to God. Fearing the Lord's ire, the Reverend Rhoden interrupts a wedding ceremony in progress to promise God that if He will but spare him the temple will be started on the morrow.

Willie Deavers, who is a proud Blue Blood spoiled rotten by his parents. He is too lazy to work and marries below him a Red Neck girl who supports and serves him as a slave. His pregnant wife is still working when the Lights appear. He vows to change his ways when a Red Neck midwife ministers to his wife during labor pains. Justin Whitt, who is a Red Neck intellectual with a lame foot. He has read Plato's account of a sunken continent and reads the Lights as a harbinger of another submersion. Felix Harkreader, who is a feeble-minded country boy. After his parents die, he starts for Blakesburg, "the beautiful city beyond the hills"—which he thinks will be his foretaste of glory. But it takes the pilgrim over three years to reach town because along the way he is captured and held in virtual slavery by a succession of farmers. When he sees the Lights, he runs for the hills, screaming: "I know where I'm a-goin' . . . . And I won't be as long a-gittin' back as I wuz a-comin'." (p. 166) The heavenly illumination shows him that Blakesburg is not the Celestial City.

Bascom Keaton, who is a scion of one of the town's early settlers. He became an expert horse trader, exploiting the slow-witted Red Necks who came into town to swap. The first horse he traded dropped dead and almost killed his new owner. Because of his flawed character and an unpleasant family life, he becomes a sot, loses his money and ends up begging on the streets. He hobbles away from the Lights and the "Savior coming in the clouds." Uglybird, who is sexton at Lonesome Hill Cemetery and who knows already the violent history of the town through the graves he superintends. Despite his reputation as a fearless man, the Lights frighten him and he and his son jump into the grave they are digging to await the end. Uncle Jarvis Stevenson, who has recently died and has probably already met his Maker. On that fateful evening his funeral is being conducted in the colored section of Lonesome Hill; and since he was a respected Negro, many whites are attending the last rites. It is traditional that borrowed cars could be used after funerals for frolicking around the countryside, but this time the after-the-funeral partying is turned to praying.

Poodi Troxler, who is a newcomer to Blakesburg but a very successful mortician. As an outsider, however, he has trouble finding a wife. He sings well and plays the guitar—both Spanish and Hawaiian—and buys a fine house. But he has no success with the aboriginal fair sex until a divorcee sends him word to come play for her. When the Lights come on, he confesses he has been stealing tools from the rival undertaker. Marvin Clayton and Franklin Foster, who are undertakers aligned with the Greenough and Dinwiddie political factions respectively. After the two men attended the same embalming school, they return to Blakesburg to practice their skill and to compete with each other in hearses, coffins and undertaking parlor decorations. Poodi Troxler works for Clayton and he charms customers from the opposing Dinwiddie group. On September 18 an aged member of the Dinwiddie clan dies, and both undertakers are racing their hearses to claim the body—when the Lights show.

Mary Blanton, who is a big ugly woman always stringing along five or six lovers, married and single. The good women of the town do not understand their men's fascination for her and they hate her, attempting many times to run "the weaked woman" out of town. On the night of the Lights, she is entertaining five of her current lovers and falls to her knees in contrition as the men seek shelter with their families. Dewit Addington, who is a handsome outsider and the father of two illegitimate children. Refusing to marry either of the native girls he has wronged, he instead takes a Wisconsin girl as wife. Soon he begins to drink to drown his unruly conscience, but the Lights revive it and he attempts to enter an abandoned church to plead for forgiveness.

Attorney Joe Oliver, who has so many enemies he keeps his shades drawn at night. A window silhouette might make a good target for the men he has sent to prison for moonshining or chicken-stealing. Outwardly a paragon of morality, he teaches a popular Sunday School class of young people. As he leaves his house to go to his WPA-built privy out back, the Lights turn him around to his house to confess to his wife that he has been unfaithful to her for fifteen years. Judge Allie Anderson, who is a Red Neck politician who conducts most of the county business at the hogpen behind his house—perhaps a commentary on the level of his politics. As the masses panic in the streets, the good Judge waits intrepidly by the pigpen. He is assured he is "saved" and Jesus will meet him there. This upstanding Christian has, however, one minor sin to confess; and he goes to tell the lonely and despised and illegitimate Rufus Litteral that he is his father.

Ronnie Roundtree, who is a pensioned, decorated veteran of World War I. He is also a drunkard and a bad husband. He once stabs fatally his wife's ex-boyfriend, then leaves her to marry a neighbor. A female preacher castigates him for abandoning his first wife and seven children, but he does not hear her until the Lights remind him of his misdeed. Bruce Livingstone, who is the town's true patriot. Because he is an independent voter and refuses to commit himself to one church, he is called a communist. Eddie Birchfield, who is the town prophet. He anticipated the future of the horseless carriage and opened a garage. He is also a teller of tall tales about his experiences with automobiles, dogs and ghosts. Muff Henderson, who is a Sherwood Anderson-type "grotesque." His passion is dancing, and he walks in a two-step dance pattern. Neither of his four wives has been able to keep up with his dancing mania. Nellie Blake, who is the spinster descendant of Blakesburg's namesake. It is alleged that she never married because she was jilted by her groom. Her inherited wealth has been lost through a succession of natural disasters. Now living in a stable, she refuses to be moved by the sky lights: "I've moved from a flood; I've been burned out by fire, and I'm not moving again. Let the world end!" (p. 101)

Boliver Tussie, who because of his "bad luck" is one of the "Relief

Tussies." (In *Trees of Heaven* he is called a "Squatter Tussie.") He now drinks a lot and frequently beats his wife who cannot return the blows since she has been "saved." She welcomes the Lights and sends her sons to bring the old drunkard home to be with her when she "goes to Glory." He decides, on the contrary, that he doesn't care to see his wife go anywhere and clamps his teeth onto a strand of barbed wire fence—a favorite stratagem of several of Stuart's characters. He is finally pried loose with a file and taken home kicking in the Lights.

A Greenough boy and a Dinwiddie girl, who must surely have one of the longest courtships on record. In 1910, to the consternation of both factions, they fall in love. They continue to court through their young adulthood, through the natural deaths and suicides of members of their families—and on September 18, 1941, they are still going steady. Noah Billups, who was once "the meanest man in Blakesburg." He was a vicious fighter—gouging, biting, cutting and shooting his victims. He and his wife would get drunk together, and rumors circulated that they worshipped the devil. Then after the stillborn birth of their fourth child—who was "marked with the Devil," according to the perceptive midwife—they got religion. They greet the Lights joyously and prepare to dress in white for their reception into heaven. Their son, however, demurs because his father tells him that dogs are not allowed there. Horsefly Salyers, who married his wife when she was thirteen. Had not the twins died at birth, she would have borne him nine daughters before she was twenty-two. When he hears rumors that she is seeing a man in a neighboring town, he takes his cow and three youngest daughters and returns to his parents to sulk. The Lights impel him to return to his wife, who assures him that she has never been unfaithful to him. (After all, when would she have had the time?) They plan now to live happily ever after—somewhere.

Uncle Sweeter Dabney, who is a ninety-year-old fiddler. The church people assume that his fiddle will keep him out of heaven. On the night of September 18, a pious Christian speeds over to his house, expecting to see him breaking his fiddle and repenting. Instead, he is playing as the heavenly showers fall. Bill Simpson, who is a has-been fighter at twenty-one. (His opponents discovered that his one vulnerable spot is his belly.) He now operates a small restaurant with a reputation as "the hellhole of Blakesburg." He outwits the revenuers by tying jugs and bottles of moonshine to the limbs of a large elm behind his place of business. He dances gleefully as the Lights promise the town's destruction. He knows that his place is no more of a hellhole than the rest of Blakesburg.

Melinda Sprouse, who is a Red Neck businesswoman who got her nest egg by taking in washing. Now she lends money at usurious rates and has become wealthy. Knowing that her debtors will want to meet the Accountant-in-the-Sky with all their accounts in order, she goes about in the fiery night collecting money owed her. Jad Hix, a woodchopper who does not believe the Lights are a signal of the End. He has seen them before up in Michigan, and he maintains that they are a "token." He convinces a group of people that W-A-R is being spelled out in the clouds in colors of red, white and blue.

Old Glory Gardner, whose true colors are lit up by the Lights. The colors are red, white and blue. Old Glory's favorite subject in school was history, and he idolizes the flag and is given to long patriotic speeches. As a teacher he would give a student an *A* if he couldn't conjugate a Latin verb but could sing "The Star-Spangled Banner." The pledge to the flag was also worth an *A* to a student who could not recite the assigned lesson. On the night of September 18, 1941, he waves a miniature flag (symbolizing perhaps the size of his patriotism), orating: "This is the end of time! This is the end of Blakesburg! It is the end of Blake County, our State and our Republic! But I shall take . . . the flag of this Republic with me and plant it in the Glory Land where it will bloom forever and forever." (p. 90)

Sadly, Old Glory is not given the chance to Americanize heaven—at least not on September 18, 1941. Neither are the other citizens of Blakesburg able to act on their resolutions—for September 19 dawns upon the town just as it had many times before. There is no evidence of the Lights that had frightened almost everyone into a temporary insane morality. The town is again in the old groove from which it had been jarred for a few hours. Like repentant sinners who sometimes make confessions and promises in the fever of a revival, the people of Blakesburg will continue to be as human—and laughable—as ever.

Stuart's masterful satire on man's imperfect humanity is accomplished deftly and without exaggeration. He simply allows believable characters to expose themselves in all their ludicrous inconsistencies and cover-ups. He shows us that people believe what they want to. They refuse to hear the minister who tells them the truth about the phenomenon and believe instead the eschatalogical rantings of a woman evangelist who fires their fears with harangues about the wrath of God. And the good minister's insistence that He is not a God of wrath—but a God of Love—is drowned in the weeping, wailing, cursing and gnashing of teeth. It is not surprising that this book has never been very popular, though it is one of Stuart's best. It is also plain why many of Stuart's readers vilified him for it. The minister of the God of Love speaks the book's theme: "It's strange but when you tell people the truth they won't believe you . . . . " (p. 253)

FINAL WORDS

Jesse Stuart's Appalachian microcosm is summed up in a passage from "The Anglo-Saxons of Auxierville."[167] Focusing on man's abuse of the land and his consequent abuse of himself, he writes: "They ['the Anglo-Saxons'] will bring the coal from the bowels of the mountains. They will load it in buggies and shoot the black diamonds down to the empty cars from the tipples. They will die natural and unnatural deaths. They will be buried deep in Anglo-Saxon sandrock, under Auxier County skies . . . . Their spirits will leave their temples of clay for one of the eight Baptist Heavens." Stuart is not usually so direct in his social criticism. He prefers to dramatize his concerns in characters, stories and episodes that are often humorous. "Horse-trading Trembles"[168] is more characteristic of his method. The story is an excellent example of his humor and the uses to which he puts humor. Reversing the usual deception in horse trading, a young man decides to get even with the trader who has humiliated his father by swapping him a fast-breathing plug horse for two mule colts and $20.00 to boot. The boy's technique is to make the same horse appear to be young and healthy—and then to tell the truth. He polishes the saddle, brushes the yellow from the horse's teeth, rubs jet oil onto his fetlocks, mane and tail and feeds him plenty of food. As most of us do for ourselves, the boy is preparing a public mask for his horse. Then he will play the role of the humorist by stripping away the false exterior appearance. On the next Trading Day (perhaps September 18, 1941, one hopes), the boy walks beside the horse till he gets near the sales area and then mounts to ride up in regal splendor. As the boy expected, the former owner of the nag fails to recognize him and buys him back with the two mules and an additional $100.00. The boy's insistence that this is the same no-good horse for which his father had traded only a month before falls on deaf ears. No one believes him—until the magnificently veneered pile of skin and bones crumples to the ground. A laughing bystander taunts the fallen horse trader: "But he told you the truth . . . . And you, like the rest of us, wouldn't believe him. The truth was funny." This archetypal story is an ideal demonstration of how humor punctures appearances to reveal reality—though the humorist is seldom believed until too late.

Stuart is firmly in the classical tradition of humorists. He is a moralist, who in Professor Clarke's words, is involved in "driving out evil with laughter." As a humorist he has depicted his people honestly and lovingly. If he did not love people, he would not bother to write. Ruel Foster has called him a "yea-sayer" who "fights pessimism the way he fought death." Like one of his humorous creations, Uglybird Skinner, Stuart tries to be for his reader the ideal poet that Faulkner describes—"one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail."

Jesse Stuart's humor is, then, ultimately a joyous affirmation of man. While exploiting man's often ludicrous ways, it demonstrates his exuberance, his liveliness, his robustness—and his improvability. Stuart the humorist seems to say: "Yes, I know that man is cruel, petty and hateful and that he fails as parent, neighbor, lover, farmer, politician and in all his social roles. But I believe that through laughter we can purge away some of his undesirable traits. At the least, we can laugh and bear it."

NOTES

[1] *Album of Destiny* (New York, 1944), p. 164. An article by Stuart, "A Land and Its People," in the July, 1970 issue of *The Register* of the Kentucky Historical Society, pp. 221-230, is an historical portrait of Stuart country, Greenup and central Greenup County.

[2] Sonnet 208, *Man With a Bull-Tongue Plow* (New York, 1934), p. 111. Stuart is a Southern writer, but as he acknowledges in the title poem in *Kentucky Is My Land,* Appalachia is very different from the lower South:

> Then I went beyond the hills to see

[3] Letter to Wade Hall, dated May 29, 1970.

[4] Mary Washington Clarke, *Jesse Stuart's Kentucky* (New York, 1968), p. 51. Note: Following initial citation in a footnote, short references will be used for succeeding notations. After the first reference, page number for novels and autobiographical books will be given in the text. Inclusive page numbers will be used for short stories in appropriate footnotes. Specific page numbers will be given for poems in footnotes. Complete publishing data for each reference cited in this study is included in the bibliography.

[5] Ruel E. Foster, *Jesse Stuart* (New York, 1968), p. 6.

[6] *My Land Has a Voice* (New York, 1966), pp. 28-38.

[7] "Dark Winter," *A Jesse Stuart Harvest* (New York, 1965), pp. 124-149.

[8] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest,* pp. 150-171.

[9] *The Year of My Rebirth* (New York, 1956), pp. 67-68.

[10] *My Land Has a Voice*, pp. 3-12

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 76-84

[12] Quoted in Everetta Love Blair, *Jesse Stuart: His Life and Works* (Columbia, S.C., 1967), p. 199.

[13] "Notes on Jane Stuart," *Poems from the Hills, 1970* (Charleston, W. Va., 1970), p. 83.

[14] *Plowshare in Heaven* (New York, 1958), pp. 127-137.

[15] *Taps for Private Tussie* (New York, 1943), p. 204.

[16] A source of much of the humor as well as tragedy in the literature of the lower South, the Negro is almost completely missing in the works of Stuart. This absence, however, is an accurate reflection of Stuart's region where Negroes have never lived in great numbers.

[17] *Trees of Heaven* (New York, 1940), p. 72.

[18] *Foretaste of Glory* (New York, 1946), p. 195.

[19] *Clearing in the Sky* (New York, 1950), pp. 1-9.

[20] "Another Thanksgiving," *My Land Has a Voice*, pp. 233-243.

[21] "*The Good Spirit of Laurel Ridge* (New York, 1953), pp. 156-157.

[22] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest*, pp. 242-251. A. B. Longstreet includes a gander-pulling sketch in his *Georgia Scenes* (1835).

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 103-113.

[24] *A Jesse Stuart Reader* (New York, 1966), pp. 71-77.

[25] *My Land Has a Voice*, pp. 209-218.

[26] *Come Gentle Spring* (New York, 1969), pp. 164-175.

[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 143-163. Morgan Neville's sketch of Mike Fink (1770?-1832) is "The Last of the Boatman," published in the Cincinnati giftbook, *The Western Souvenir*, in 1828.

[28] *Save Every Lamb* (New York, 1964), p. 4.

[29] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest*, p. 8.

[30] "Memory Albums," *The Tennessee Teacher* (February, 1970), p. 9.

[31] *Trees of Heaven*, p. 308

[32] *Save Every Lamb*, pp. 261-265.

[33] *Plowshare in Heaven*, pp. 97-112.

[34] *Album of Destiny*, p. 51.

[35] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 97-119.

[36] *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, pp. 130-138.

[37] *Album of Destiny*, p. 68.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 114

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 205.

[40] *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, p. 250.

[41] *Hie to the Hunters* (New York, 1950), p. 219.

[42] *Plowshare in Heaven*, pp. 25-35.

[43] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest*, pp. 198-209.

[44] *Clearing in the Sky*, pp. 41-47.

[45] *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, p. 167.

[46] *Album of Destiny*, p. 104.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

[48] *Plowshare in Heaven*, pp. 206-215.

[49] *Ibid.*, pp. 228-235.

[50] *The Year of My Rebirth*, p. 61. A poem called "Independence" from the "Songs of a Mountain Plowman" section of *Kentucky Is My Land* contains these lines:

> As long as I have land, seed, working tools,
> .
> .
> .
> (p. 53)

[51] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 210-219.

[52] *Clearing in the Sky*, pp. 219-231.

[53] *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, pp. 49-59.

[54] *Man With a Bull-Tongue Plow*, p. 239.

[55] *Album of Destiny*, p. 134.

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 235.

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 201.

[58] *My Land Has a Voice*, pp. 126-140.

[59] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 234-251.

[60] *My Land Has a Voice*, pp. 173-184. The story of Jeff, Stuart's uncle, is retold in *God's Oddling.*

[61] *Ibid.*, pp. 219-232.

[62] *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, pp. 78-87.

[63] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest*, pp. 28-44.

[64] *My Land Has a Voice*, pp. 141-158.

[65] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 176-194.

[66] *My Land Has a Voice*, pp. 115-125.

[67] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest*, pp. 210-227.

[68] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 220-233.

[69] *Plowshare in Heaven*, pp. 172-184.

[70] *Ibid.*, pp. 73-83.

[71] *Ibid.*, pp. 113-126.

[72] *Daughter of the Legend* (New York, 1965).

[73] *God's Oddling* (New York, 1960), p. 157.

[74] *Jesse Stuart*, p. 44.

[75] *Clearing in the Sky*, pp. 32-40.

[76] *God's Oddling*, p. 250.

[77] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest*, pp. 172-187.

[78] *Ibid.*, pp. 45-57.

[79] *Plowshare in Heaven*, pp. 1-24.

[80] *Clearing in the Sky*, pp. 41-47.

[81] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest*, pp. 228-241.

[82] *Ibid.*, pp. 188-197.

[83] *Clearing in the Sky*, pp. 160-168.

[84] *Ibid.*, pp. 185-193. The rivalry between the undertakers is further explored in *Foretaste of Glory*.

[85] *My Land Has a Voice*, pp. 60-75.

[86] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 45-54.

[87] Stuart used this incident as the subject of one of his Shan Powderjay stories, "A Ribbon for Baldy," *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, pp. 151-154.

[88] *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, pp. 88-96.

[89] *Kentucky Is My Land* (New York, 1952), pp. 11-17.

[90] *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

[91] *Save Every Lamb*, pp. 63-71.

[92] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 120-129.

[93] *Clearing in the Sky*, pp. 147-159.

[94] *Ibid.*, pp. 105-117.

[95] *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, pp. 114-122.

[96] Boliver Tussie also appears in the children's book, *The Beatinest Boy*, where he is a hound-dog doctor with seven hounds and five children. He is depicted as a sorry farmer but an excellent possum hunter.

[97] *To Teach, To Love* (New York, 1970), pp. 271-272.

[98] *Save Every Lamb*, pp. 197-209.

[99] *Ibid.*, pp. 166-178.

[100] *Ibid.*, pp. 210-215.

[101] *Ibid.*, pp. 148-165.

[102] *Plowshare in Heaven*, pp. 237-247. The story of Old Dick is also told in *God's Oddling*.

[103] *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, pp. 38-48.

[104] *My Land Has a Voice*, pp. 85-97.

[105] *Ibid.*, pp. 159-172.

[106] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 272-282.

[107] *Save Every Lamb*, pp. 139-147.

[108] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest*, pp. 58-72.

[109] *Save Every Lamb*, pp. 239-246.

[110] *Plowshare in Heaven*, pp. 185-196.

[111] *Ibid.*, pp. 61-72.

[112] *Save Every Lamb*, pp. 216-226.

[113] *Ibid.*, pp. 247-255.

[114] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 82-96.

[115] *Ibid.*, pp. 252-271.

[116] *Album of Destiny*, p. 127.

[117] *Ibid.*, p. 196.

[118] *Save Every Lamb*, pp. 95-103.

[119] *Clearing in the Sky*, pp. 76-90.

[120] *My Land Has a Voice*, pp. 51-59.

[121] *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, pp. 123-129.

[122] *Save Every Lamb*, pp. 38-50.

[123] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 55-69.

[124] *Album of Destiny*, p. 96.

[125] *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, pp. 155-166.

[126] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 12-20.

[127] *Plowshare in Heaven*, pp. 84-96.

[128] *Stories from the Hills, 1970* (Charleston, W. Va., 1970), pp. 60-67.

[129] *Save Every Lamb*, pp. 117-138.

[130] *A Jesse Stuart Reader*, pp. 107-113.

[131] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest*, pp. 114-123. This story is also included as an episode in *God's Oddling*.

[132] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 31-44.

[133] *Ibid.*, pp. 130-142.

[134] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest*, pp. 252-271.

[135] *Come Gentle Spring*, pp. 21-29.

[136] *Andy Finds a Way* (New York, 1961). The short story version is called "Soddy."

[137] *Red Mule* (New York, 1955).

[138] *The Rightful Owner* (New York, 1960).

[139] *A Penny's Worth of Character* (New York, 1954).

[140] *The Beatinest Boy* (New York, 1953).

[141] *A Ride with Huey the Engineer* (New York, 1966).

[142] *Old Ben* (New York, 1970).

[143] *Mongrel Mettle* (New York, 1944).

[144] *Jesse Stuart*, p. 104.

[145] Lee Pennington, *The Dark Hills of Jesse Stuart* (Cincinnati, 1967), p. 62.

[146] Sonnets 610, 611, *Man With a Bull-Tongue Plow*, p. 314.

[147] *The Thread That Runs So True* (New York, 1949). The school names referred to in this section are those used in Stuart's books.

[148] *Mr. Gallion's School* (New York, 1967).

[149] *Plowshare in Heaven*, pp. 197-205.

[150] *Clearing in the Sky*, pp. 194-205.

[151] This incident is also the subject of a short story, "Road Number One," in *Clearing in the Sky*, pp. 133-146.

[152] *Clearing in the Sky,* pp. 91-104.

[153] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest,* pp. 73-89.

[154] "How We Applied American Democracy," *Stories from the Hills, 1970,* p. 63.

[155] *Come Gentle Spring,* pp. 195-209. An autobiographical account of the story is included in *God's Oddling.*

[156] *A Jesse Stuart Harvest,* pp. 272-284.

[157] *Plowshare in Heaven,* pp. 216-227.

[158] *A Jesse Stuart Reader,* pp. 60-70.

[159] *Album of Destiny,* p. 100.

[160] *Ibid.,* p. 192.

[161] *Plowshare in Heaven,* pp. 254-266.

[162] *Man With a Bull-Tongue Plow,* p. 54.

[163] *Ibid.,* pp. 66-68.

[164] *Plowshare in Heaven,* pp. 156-171.

[165] *Harvest of Youth* (Howe, Okla., 1930).

[166] *The Broadman Hymnal* (Nashville, 1940), p. 120.

[167] *Clearing in the Sky,* pp. 206-218.

[168] *Ibid.,* pp. 118-132.

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